

Die Free or Die a Failure

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Die Free or Die a Failure

by [Mickey_99](#)

Summary

“He’s joining us earlier than we anticipated.”

“He’s a flight risk. This way there should be no more risk of him getting away from you. I’ve killed his mother. He belongs to you.”

“Six years old and already training in the Raven’s nest. He will be a player that won’t be rivaled.”

Nathaniel lives a hard life in the ravens nest, choosing Jean and Kevin's safety and happiness over his own constantly. Like the martyr he is. Then one day he is given a chance. It's a fools bet, and Nathaniel is unlikely to win it.

But he has one season to take the Foxes to championships and win.

If he doesn't, well.. he doesn't like the other options.

So he makes his own. Win or die.

Notes

This chapter was written different then the rest of the fic will be. Consider this a prologue

- Translation into Español available: [Morir Libre o Morir Fracasado](#) by [Lilly18](#)

Chapter 1

“He’s joining us earlier than we anticipated.”

“He’s a flight risk. This way there should be no more risk of him getting away from you. I’ve killed his mother. He belongs to you.”

“Six years old and already training in the Raven’s nest. He will be a player that won’t be rivaled.”

“Even if you find no use for him, your brother already enjoyed a piece of him last night. Who knew my useless son could have so many possible futures.”

“I am surprised Kengo didn’t keep him.”

“He’d already promised him to you.”

“Pleasure doing business with you Wesninski.”

“It was all mine Tetsuji.”

Nathaniel is passed, broken. Hurt. Bleeding. Still crying into the arms of Tetsuji Moriyama.

“My name is Riko.”

“Mine’s Nathaniel.”

His voice is quiet. He has to be quiet.

“I heard your father is the butcher. Does that mean you’ve killed people.”

“I’m nothing like him!”

Shut up. Don’t make people mad at you.

“Is he the one who gave you those scars?”

“Yes.”

“It’s okay, you’re safe here.”

He believed him. Nathaniel believed him.

“This is Kevin.

“Hi, I’m Nathaniel.”

“Can I call you Nate.”

“Sure.”

Kevin was Neil’s friend. And Riko promised to protect Neil.

“You’re such a pretty boy.”

“Leave me alone, I’m underaged.”

“Seven is my lucky number kid, I don’t mind.”

“Screw off.”

“The mouth on you! Riko isn’t old enough to protect you from us yet. I’d watch your mouth.”

“No! Stop!”

Nathaniel is left, bloody. Ashamed. Dirty. And he is left the same way when it happens again... and again... and again...

“Riko, they won’t stop.”

“I’ll protect you when I become captain. I promise.”

“I need help now. It’s been too long. It hurts.”

“Stop complaining Nathaniel. I’m sure you’ve had worse. Just wait until I am captain.”

“It’s been three years! I can’t keep doing this!”

“Nathaniel!”

He was tired. He was hurt. He was breaking.

“Nate?”

“Kevin?”

“Jesus what did they do!?”

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Nate you’re bleeding.”

“That’s normal. Are you hurt?”

“Why would I be hurt? Jesus look at yourself- “

“They said they wanted to touch you. So I told them they weren’t going anywhere near you. They knocked me out before leaving.”

“What the fuck were you thinking!?”

“I won’t let them hurt you.”

“You need to look after- “

“No. I won’t let them hurt the only family who cares about me.”

He was a protector. A pillar of strength. A martyr. But inside he was just broken.

“This is Jean. He will be number four now. He is rooming with Nathaniel.”

“Do you really speak French?”

“Yes.”

“Kevin and I do too! Don’t speak it in front of Riko though.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Too long.”

He was trapped. No way out. Not even a home to run back to. The nest wasn’t home. But there was nowhere else.

“Don’t you lay a hand on him!”

“Protecting Kevin and Jean!? You can’t have them hiding behind you forever! How long are you going to get on your knees to protect them for?”

“As long as it takes.”

Riko promised to be the protector once he became captain. Just two more years. Just two more.

“This needs to stop.”

“No.”

“Nate please.”

“I hate that word.”

“Nate it’s killing you.”

“It would kill me more to watch them do this to you two. I’m fine. I have you two to patch me up after.”

Just one more year. One more year.

“Captain Riko!!! Come on. You know you’ve got to try him out. It’s team tradition.”

Kevin and Jean watch horrified.

Nathaniel glares.

“Riko you made me a promise!”

A dark laugh.

“And you thought I would keep it!?”

Betrayed. Bloody. Pain. Rage. Hurt.

“Kevin get over here now!”

“No, he’s not going!”

“Excuse me? Number Three I own him. He comes when I call!”

“You won’t hurt him!”

“I will, and you can’t stop me!”

“Use me instead. Don’t hurt him.”

“Nate!”

“Jean take Kevin and go.”

“Abram...”

“Go, Jean!”

“I’m getting really sick of this shit Nathaniel!”

“Shut up! You always say I am prettier to hurt than Kevin anyways!”

“That you are.”

There is a cruel smile. Pain. A hard floor. More pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

“I’m going to get you guys out.”

“It’s not possible.”

“I’ll find a way.”

“Will this way involve you getting hurt.”

Silence.

“Nate!”

“It’s unimportant.”

“Not to us.”

“I’m getting you out and that’s final. And when I do, you will leave. Even if that means you leave without me. Do you understand?”

“No- “

“Kevin!”

“We won’t- “

“Jean!”

The two of them are his family. They are precious. Nathaniel is broken. Dirty. Used. Expendable. At least this way he was of some use to them.

“Neil!”

“Jean! What’s wrong!?”

“Riko is going to hurt Kevin! He looked ready to kill him!”

“Fuck! That stupid ERC rumor!”

Running. Panic. Anger.

Then.

Sound of a scream, and the smell of blood.

“Nathaniel do not interfere.”

There was bone. Fuck he could see the bones in Kevin’s hand.

“Jean take him and go to our room!”

“He wouldn’t dare.”

“It’s me you should be worried about Riko.”

“I’m going to tear you apart Nathaniel.”

Blood. Pain. None of it mattered. He dragged himself back to Kevin. He had failed Kevin. He had failed Kevin so bad.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m getting you out of here. Tonight. I can’t take both of you- “

“Get Kevin out. You and I will be fine here.”

“I can’t leave you two!”

“Yes you can! I’m taking you to your father! You tell him who you are! And you get back into playing shape! You best Riko at his own fucking game!”

“I can’t- “

“You can! You are the best striker on the court, and you are my brother! You can and you will!”

Nathaniel has to pull Kevin out, his hand over the striker’s mouth.

“You’re stealing the master’s car!?”

Silence

“Nate! He’s going to kill you!!!”

“I don’t care. You’re getting out of here.”

The drive takes close to six hours. But it’s worth it when Neil drops Kevin at the front.

“Don’t come back.”

“What about you and Jean?”

“I’ll get Jean out and send him your way soon.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Nate- “

“Go Kevin! You need to check out your hand. I want you on the court again. Promise me. Promise me even if you have to play right-handed.”

“Nate- “

“Kevin! Promise me!”

“I promise.”

When Neil arrives back to Edgar Allan, he takes both his and Jean’s beatings. And an extra one for taking Jean’s. He can’t move after. The ravens have fun with him then.

“Jean I am so sorry!”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I let you get raped. It should have been me. I’ve failed Kevin and now you- “

“You have taken this shit for how many years for us!?”

“That’s not the point- “

“No! You don’t get to apologise to me! Not when this is the first and only time it’s happened to me here!!! Not when you spent so many years being raped and tortured in mine and Kevin’s stead!!! You owe yourself more than that!!!”

Silence

“Abram?”

“This will not happen again.”

Abram what are you going to do?”

“You’re getting out of here.”

“Abram stop.”

“No! I won’t allow them to hurt you!”

Nathaniel makes a call.

“Lord Kengo. Thank you for seeing me.”

“I understand you have a request for me.”

“An offer.”

“Speak.”

“Let Jean go. In return I’ll be yours from here on out.”

Silence. Then a small smile on the Lord’s face that sickens Nathaniel’s stomach.

“We have a deal.”

Nathaniel packs Jean’s bags that very same night. He grabs Jean and pulls him as fast as he can go.

“Abram! What’s going on!?”

“I freed you! You are free! Go to Kevin! Play Exy at Palmetto with Kevin.”

“Impossible- “

“Would I lie?”

“... Abram what did you do?”

“Don’t ask me that question.”

His skin crawls as he thinks about what he did for Jean's freedom. But he regrets absolutely nothing.

"Abram what did you- "

"Nathaniel! Where do you think Jean is going?"

"Jean is leaving. Orders of Lord Kengo."

Silence. Then a choked sob.

"Abram what did you do?!"

"Go, Jean!"

"Grab Moroau."

"No! You will not touch him again. Jean get out and never come back. Don't make what I had to do, have been in vain."

There is silence. Then running footsteps. Then the slam of the front door.

"I will kill you."

"Your father won't like you much after that."

"What?"

“Daddy likes me more than you now Riko. He won’t be happy if you mark me up.”

Riko doesn’t. Apparently water torture can be done with minimal marks.

“Whore.”

“Slut.”

“Disgusting.”

Neil tries to ignore how much he hates the words. The Ravens can’t touch him anymore, not with him being Kengo’s.

“My father is dying. He will be dead soon. When he goes, I will be getting rid of the whorish deal you have with him.”

“Please my Lord! Kevin and Jean deserve better than the nest.”

“You are nothing but a whore who jumped into my father’s bed. My mother had to listen as you two had your fun.”

“My Lord, I only did what I had to to have my family survive. Please give me the chance to show my skills.”

He had to keep Kevin and Jean safe.

“I have no need for a whore.”

“I can play Exy.”

“You are untested.”

“Then test me. One season!”

“Give me time to think about it.”

Ichirou leaves without a second glance.

“Nate, did you hear? My father is dead!!!”

Fear. No protection.

“I’ve been waiting for this day a long time Nate.”

“Riko stop.”

“No. You can’t deny me anymore! Tie him down! I am going to break him once and for all.”

Neil screams for the first time in years that night. Screams for help and mercy. But none comes, and none is shown.

“I’ve thought about your deal. I’ve decided that you have one year. Move to Palmetto. If you win championships, then I will allow you to live your own life. You will of course play professional Exy and give us some of your profits.”

“What about Kevin and Jean?”

“They are free still, no lines attached. However I’m not offering them or you any protection, if they get dragged back then so be it. And if you get dragged back so be it. I am giving you a chance.”

Ichirou turns to leave.

“And if I lose?”

“Then you have choices...”

Neil packs his bag quickly. He’s almost out the door when Riko catches him.

“You aren’t leaving Nathaniel.”

“You can’t stop me!”

“I can break you.”

Neil lost his voice from screaming, but still he got his broken body out the door and onto a greyhound bus. He’d left his bag. But it didn’t matter. The words Ichirou had said still echoed in his ears.

“If you can’t win championships you will have three options. One, Return to your father. Two, Return to Riko, or Three, I will sell you to a trafficking ring I am trying to get to back off quietly.”

Neil’s head rang and he knew he wanted none of the above.

If Neil didn't bring the foxes to championships. If they lost. Neil would put a bullet through his own head.

He would get away and stay away. He wasn't going back.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

TW: Talks of suicide. And just put all the tw you have for the book into the entirety of this fanfic

Neil awoke in a soft bed, not a cold locker room floor. He awoke to sunlight, not to a raven holding him down.

It was the first time in years that he was waking up to a decent looking day.

It took him a minute to remember where he was. He remembered a beating. He remembered the ravens holding him down. He remembered crawling up the stairs out of the nest. He remembered buying a ticket and riding a greyhound bus to Palmetto. But he didn't remember making it there.

Neil groaned and covered his head in pain.

"Good," a gruff voice spoke, startling Neil before he could do a bodily assessment." You're finally up."

Neil's startle pulled at what felt like stitches on his stomach. He winced and touched his abdomen. But still he scanned the room until his eyes laid upon Coach Wymack. The fox coach.

"Did you pull any stitches? Abby will have my head if you already pulled some." Coach Wymack spoke again.

Neil opened his mouth to speak, but all that he could manage from his abused throat was a hoarse wheeze.

He made a motion of writing on paper, and thankfully Wymack seemed to understand.

Soon a paper and pen was placed in front of Neil. Neil wrote.

No, no stitches are pulled.

"Good," Wymack gruffly said, "Then we can talk. Who are you?"

Nathaniel Wesninski. But call me Neil.

"You want to explain why you're at my school? You're obviously a raven even though I've never seen you on the court."

Neil twirled the pen with his fingers, wondering how much he should tell Wymack.

I heard you needed a new striker.

"And so you decided to come from the best school in the nation to the worst school?" Wymack inquired, "Somehow I'm not buying it."

It's true. Though I will admit Kevin and Jean being here is a big reason why I came.

Wymack stared at the paper a moment.

"And Riko is just gonna let you go? No questions? We are already fighting Riko to keep Kevin and Jean. And I'm not sure I want to subject my players to more of that just to have you as a striker."

Neil clenched his eyes shut, and his hands shook fearfully. If he got sent back-

Well he guessed he could just kill himself before it came to that.

The thought made him let out a hysterical laugh, one that burned his abused and raw throat.

Riko won't bother with Jean and Kevin as long as I'm around. I tend to keep him focused.

"That's not comforting," Wymack said shortly. But Neil could see his shoulders starting to relax.

Trust me, I know.

"What are you going to do? Do you have anywhere else to go?" Wymack asked.

Neil chuckled.

The morgue?

"Someone's trying to kill you?"

Me.

Wymack gave a short laugh but then-

" Can I see Kevin and Jean before you send me away? To say goodbye."

Wymack stops laughing, his eyes set upon Neil's face. And Neil hears the sharp intake of breath the man takes.

"You aren't kidding," Wymack breathes.

I'd rather die than go back.

Neil sets his jaw. And goes to write again, but the paper is full. His writing was too large and unstructured with how injured his arms were.

Neil makes an attempt to clear his throat.

"Can I see them?" He asks. His voice sounds so destroyed that even he flinches away from the sound. Speaking makes him wince.

Wymack opens his mouth to answer, there is a strange look in his eye. But suddenly a door slams open, and Neil jumps off the side of the bed and lands hard on his side.

Neil groans in pain, and he feels something wet on his side.

"I heard we have a birdie who flew too far from the nest," a voice said maniacally.

Neil knows the voice. He had kept tabs on it ever since the day that Riko had come into his room swinging, all because Kevin was still being watched out for. It had happened again when Jean was taken under the midgets wing.

And despite Neil being wary of the short man. He was grateful. Andrew was protecting Neil's family.

Neil propped himself against the wall and stared at Andrew.

Andrew's face held a smile that was far too similar to Riko's for Neil's liking.

Neil barely held back a flinch.

"I'll be gone soon," Neil rasped. Pain shot through his throat and he grimaced. Neil gripped at his throat, like gripping it from the outside could take away any of the pain inside.

"Little birdie has lost his ability to go chirp chirp," Andrew said stepping forward, "I bet I could take him out now with minimal screaming."

"Minyard step back!" Wymack ordered.

Andrew didn't listen, but he also didn't step any closer to Neil.

"Let me see them," Neil rasped again, turning his head to Wymack. "Let me see them and then I'll be gone."

"Now hold on just a damned- "

"Little bird wants to fly away so soon," Andrew says crouching down, inspecting Neil, "We were just starting the party!"

"Pity I can't stay," Neil's voice sounds worse the more he speaks. It feels worse too. "I just need to see them and then you'll never see me again."

"Absolutely not," Wymack said. His voice left no room for argument.

Neil let his head fall. Maybe it was better this way. Jean and Kevin could just think that Nathaniel got away and was in hiding somewhere. He'd go somewhere where his body wouldn't be found. And then he would do it.

"I understand," Neil said. Because even if he knew he wasn't a threat. The fact that Wymack and Andrew were going to such lengths meant Kevin and Jean would be safe. Neil had succeeded in his mission of getting them out, his own safety had been nothing but an afterthought. An unattainable dream. "I'll be going now then. Do you have my knives?"

His knives were the only thing he had been able to snatch from the nest.

"The baby bird likes to play with knives! Don't you know that knives can hurt you?" Andrew laughs.

"That's the point. Do you have them?" Neil asked Wymack again.

"EVERYONE SHUT UP FOR TWO GODDAMN SECONDS!!!" Wymack shouted. Neil felt his heart drop. His eyes went wide. Panic clawed at his chest and he flinched hard.

There was a moment of silence.

"I'm not gonna hurt you kid," Wymack spoke gently.

"I might," Andrew smiled.

"Miyard get the fuck out," Wymack pointed towards the door.

Andrew once again didn't listen. But his mouth closed and he didn't say anything else.

"I'm not going to let you leave after you basically announced a plan to kill yourself!" Wymack said incredulously. "I'm certainly not about to let you see Jean and Kevin just so you can give them a goodbye that will make them shit themselves more than they already have!"

Neil stared at Wymack.

"I, for one, think that we should let the bird try and free fall. I want to see if his wings are broken too," Andrew speaks again.

"Give me a gun and I'll be gone faster."

"Tempting."

"Jesus Christ!" Wymack threw his hands up in the air, "I haven't even talked to Dan about recruiting you yet. Hell, I've barely known you for an hour, and I am already ready to book you an appointment with Betsy."

Neil shrinks back against the wall.

"You'll let me stay?"

"I'm certainly not going to cast you out when you're like this!" Wymack responds. He glares at Andrew, silencing the goalie's response before it came, "And we do need a new striker sub. But I would need to see you play, I can't just accept you because you say you're good."

"I don't like this one," Andrew says flippantly, "Throw him back."

"Am I a fish now?" Neil asks annoyed.

"You're whatever I want you to be." Andrew responds, smile still in place.

Neil flinches back at the comment.

"You're whatever I want to call you princess. Get on the bed."

Andrew notices the flinch and his smile grows wider.

"Stop tormenting him you crazy fuck," Wymack says annoyed.

The door opens and a woman steps in. She's carrying a large medical kit and she gives Wymack an exasperated look.

"Can Jean and Kevin come in now, they are pacing holes into my living room floor," The woman says. Her eyes fall to Neil, and she seems to be the first one other than Neil to realize the torn stitches, blood seeping through bandages.

"I told you not to stress him out!" Abby whirled on Wymack. Wymack pointed at Andrew.

"Blame our resident Psychopath who came bursting into the room!"

Abby turned, "Andrew out! And send Kevin and Jean up."

"If you think I'm leaving them with him you are sorely mistaken," Andrew says dangerously. "In fact, I am inclined to never let you within their line of sight. How'd you get out little birdie? I highly doubt that Riko opened the cage for you to get out, out of the goodness of his heart."

"He has no goodness in his heart," Neil glared.

"Precisely my point," Andrew spread his arms wide in a condescending way. "Jean and Kevin have played in enough of Riko's games. There will be no more. How'd you get out?!"

There was an edge to Andrew's voice, and instantly Neil's guard rose.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," Andrew says smiling, "See, I made a deal and I intend to keep it."

"How I got out will not interfere with your deal to protect Kevin and Jean," Neil says looking Andrew in the eye. Neil's temper was spiking.

Andrew's smile darkens, "You see, I don't make it a habit to take people's words at face value, so I'm going to ask again. How did you get out?"

Neil scowled.

"Enough Minyard!" Wymack shouted, "The kid is still bleeding on the floor."

"I hope he bleeds out," Andrew says flippantly. "Less problems for me."

"I don't know," Neil says shrugging, "I may just have to annoy your ass from the grave."

Wymack steps between them before the bickering can continue.

"Get your wards up here and then get the fuck out!"

"If you think I'm leaving them alone with him- "

"Then don't," Wymack states pointedly, "But you'll sit in the corner and watch silently like a guardian fucking angel."

"Are you calling me an angel now coach?"

"OUT!"

Andrew let's out a loud laugh and bounds out the door.

Not even moments later there is pounding feet on the floor. Moments later, two faces Neil never thought he would see again appeared.

Jean's eyes were wide as he looked at Nathaniel. His face betraying every emotion he was feeling inside. Kevin stood beside him, equally expressive.

Neil looked at them both, they were safe. Unharmd. The sight made him want to cry tears of happiness, but he settled for his usual cocky smirk.

"Did you miss me?" Neil asks in French.

Chapter 3

Kevin was the first one to move. He was across the room in only a few strides, dodging the arm Andrew sent out to grab him, and then dodging the arm Wymack held out to slow him. He grabbed Neil's chin, and Neil forced himself not to flinch away.

This was Kevin. Kevin would never hurt him.

Kevin looked over Neil's battered and bruised face, and Neil could feel Kevin's hand begin to shake.

"We thought you died," Kevin croaked out in french. Neil finally forces himself to meet Kevin's eyes. And when he finally does he freezes.

Tears stream down Kevin's face.

"We texted you when Kengo died," Jean spoke, his voice also wobbling. Neil watched as Jean sank to his knees, *"We called and texted. We even called the master- "*

Neil's eyes widened at that.

"You called the master!?" Neil shouted in angry French, the shout caused his throat to burn, *"Why would you do something so stupid!?"*

"We needed to know you were okay!" Kevin shouted back. Kevin's head fell onto Neil's shoulder. *"But the master hung up on us. And your phone had been disconnected. That was two months ago!!! We thought you died!!!"*

Neil didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything. He allowed himself to tip forward into Kevin's chest while the other hugged him lightly. It was a hug that Neil could easily

escape from, but yet he found he didn't want to.

"Sorry to ruin the moment boys. Hi Neil, I'm Abby," Abby stuck out her hand for Neil to shake, and Neil awkwardly took it. "Do you mind if I take a look at those stitches?"

Neil looked at his side, suddenly remembering the fact that he was steadily bleeding. His entire torso and arms were covered and wrapped in bandages. Not a single bit of skin was showing. It was then that Neil noticed that his pants were still on. And it didn't feel like any of his lower body had been taken care of. He felt a breath of relief wash over him, but then he froze when Abby started to remove the bandages.

"Have him turn around," Neil said pointing at Andrew. His voice sounded annoyingly weak.

"No," Andrew said, a smile still in place on his face, "I don't trust you."

"I don't care," Neil said back, "My body means I get to consent to who gets to see it or not. I don't consent to you seeing it so turn around."

Andrew's smile didn't falter. But Neil noticed that his hands had stilled from where they had been fiddling with his armbands. Neil hadn't even noticed the motion until it stopped.

For a moment, Neil tensed, ready for Andrew to ignore Neil's wishes. Waiting for Andrew to be just like everyone else. But Andrew clicked his tongue and turned towards the wall.

"Coach Wymack- "

Wymack waved Neil off, not needing to even be asked. He turned to face the wall, neither man tried to peek. Still, Jean and Kevin positioned themselves in front of Neil, a protective barrier in case one of the men decided to peek. Neil thought it was probably more for his piece of mind than anything else.

The bandages fell off piece by piece, and Neil averted his eyes away from Jean and Kevin's. He didn't want to see their horror. They had seen him in situations that were bad, but never this bad. And internally he debated whether or not he should have had them turn too. But it was too late to change it. The last bandage fell off, and Kevin made a horrified choking sound. He got up and walked to the door.

For a moment Neil thought he was going to leave, but he stopped in the doorway. Kevin leaned against it, taking deep breaths.

Neil hadn't seen the damage yet, but he knew it had been bad. Had felt how bad it was.

"We shouldn't have left you," Jean says with a shaky voice.

"You didn't have a choice."

"Nate- "

Neil stiffened.

"Don't call me Nate anymore," He meant for his voice to come out strong, but it sounded broken. The french barely audible. The pain didn't help any either., *" They made that name mean something different. "*

A broken sound exits Kevin's throat.

Neil took a moment to look down at his abdomen as Abby professionally re-did the stitches on his side.

His body had always been a mass of scars for as long as he could remember, but future ones lay stark red along a mass of older scar tissue. Every single one of them was words.

‘Whore’

‘Slut’

‘Worthless’

‘Disgusting’

‘Used’

‘Nothing’

There were others. All of them progressively worse and worse. Neil’s entire body was a mass of red words carved into his skin.

“I’m guessing they’ll scar?” Neil asked Abby bitterly. He didn’t need the answer. But he needed to think of something other than the heartbroken look on Jean’s face.

“I’m sure we can look into scar removal- “

“Don’t worry about it,” Neil smiled bitterly, “There’s no point.”

The room goes silent, and Neil tries his best to lighten the mood.

“At least he didn’t carve anything that wasn’t true, right?” Neil lets out a fake laugh for a moment, but the room is tense.

Kevin's jaw sets for a moment. He opens his mouth to say something, but then he turns and walks out. Jean looks between the doorway and Neil, and Neil nods for Jean to go ahead after Kevin. The backliner leaves quickly.

Andrew lets out a laugh, "Are your boobies too much for Day to handle? I bet he's headed to the kitchen for his first drink of many today."

"Don't turn around," Neil glares at Andrew's back.

Andrew throws his hands up, "Relax tweety-bird," he says, Neil can hear his smirk, "I was just making a comment."

"Glad you like the sound of your own voice so much," Neil stated dryly, "Unfortunately I'm finding it to be a giant pain in the ass. So shut the fuck up."

"Didn't your mother teach you manners?" Andrew drawled.

"Take your manners and shove them up your ass," Neil says annoyed, "Maybe someone who cares will find them later."

"You have a lot of attitude when my back is turned," Andrew stated, "I wonder if you'll be that brave when I turn back around."

"Wait a couple minutes and you can find out for yourself, you dick."

There is an exasperated sigh from Wymack in the corner. And Abby laughs.

"I think he'll fit right in," Abby says with a smile. She secures the rest of the bandages, and then gives Neil a friendly pat on the shoulder, before leaving.

Andrew turns, he has his hands covering his eyes in a mocking fashion.

“Do you *consent* to letting me use my eyes now, tweety bird?” Andrew asked.

Neil could still see the manic smile from in between Andrew’s hands.

“I don’t know,” Neil says,” You seem less annoying now.”

Andrew lets his hands fall.

“Leave,” Andrew directs the order at Wymack.

Wymack turns and glares at Andrew, “Absolutely not.”

“I have questions for the roadrunner,” Andrew says.

“And you can ask them when he doesn’t have any stitches that can be torn open,” Wymack snaps.

Andrew remains silent. His eyes scan up and down Neil’s covered form.

Then eventually Andrew strides through the door.

Chapter 4

Wymack was insistent on Neil not leaving the house. This would have been okay, but in addition to not leaving the house Wymack also had Neil locked down on suicide watch. Something that Neil found ironic.

Two years prior Neil had attempted suicide in the nest. They had strapped Neil into some pads after some stitches, and told him to walk it off. Now he had only mentioned suicide in passing as another option, not intending to use it since he wasn't going back. But it didn't matter. Wymack had Neil locked down and practically under 24 hour supervision.

And since Andrew's group were the only ones who were still in Palmetto over the summer, this meant his babysitter (when it couldn't be Wymack or Abby) ended up being one of them.

Neil didn't mind Aaron. The guy was quiet and would sit and read medical textbooks from the corner. Andrew was never left completely alone with him, usually Kevin and Jean sat with him.

Nicky however seemed to lack all ability to follow a person's boundaries. He wasn't mean, and it was obvious he wasn't trying to cross boundaries and make Neil uncomfortable.

Honestly the guy was just trying to be nice and make Neil feel better.

But Neil found himself dreading the days Nicky watched over him.

"Coach didn't really explain why we were watching you," Nicky says shrugging, the older male sat on the bed and Neil's heart rate picked up in speed. "Are you a flight risk or something?"

Neil couldn't answer, Nicky's weight on the bed was distracting. Neil's entire mind was hyper focused on the way the bed was dipping in front of him.

"God you are so quiet," Nicky said, " That's okay though, you don't have to be a talker to have a good time!"

Nicky's wink caused Neil's stomach to twist uncomfortably.

Nicky finally huffed and stood up, "Well," Nicky said with a smile, "You've been a good boy the past few days, so I'm sure you can handle yourself while I go get some water!"

The words were caught in Neil's mind though.

"You've been such a good boy Nate, I think you deserve a reward."

"Please no."

"Shhh... I'll take good care of you."

Nicky left the room, and Neil stumbled off the bed as soon as the man had closed the door. He power walked to the window, healed enough after a week to do so without limping.

Neil was on the second floor, but that was fine. He just had to get out. He had to get away. He pushed open the window carefully before climbing out and jumping down.

Pain shot through him and he stumbled, but not a single stitch was torn.

Neil jumped the back fence and weaved through some of the backyards at a light jog. He didn't know where he was or where he was going.

But it didn't matter. He had to get away. So he ran, as fast as his legs would carry him, he ran. Thoughts of Evermore and the nest filtered through his brain.

He wanted his brain to just shut off.

He wanted the words floating through his head to stop.

But they didn't, so Neil continued to run. And run. And run.

He didn't even realize how erratic his breathing was until he found himself staring at the unforgiving orange of the foxhole court.

Neil looked around for a way to get in, the door was locked so that wasn't an option, but Neil found a tree that he could climb, that led right into a small window.

Perfect.

Neil climbed it with only minor difficulty and pushed the window open before slipping inside.

He stood there for a moment, breathing heavily. Then he turned around.

Wymack was staring at him. A phone was to his ear, but it looked like Wymack had stopped listening to whoever was on the other side.

Neil blinked.

Wymack blinked.

The sight of Wymack unexpectedly standing there was enough to pull Neil from his panic.

They both stared at each other for a solid 10 seconds with looks of surprise on their features.

Slowly Wymack hung up the phone without saying goodbye to the person on the other end, and he opened the door. The room they were in looked like an office. And Wymack stepped out, crooking a finger for Neil to follow.

Neil followed even though every instinct inside himself told him to bolt.

He heard the shouting before he saw the people.

"It's only been 20 minutes!" Neil heard Kevin shout, "He's injured, he couldn't have gotten that far."

There was a moment of silence, and then Kevin responded.

"You shouldn't have left the room!"

Wymack steps into a room and Neil follows.

Andrew, Aaron, Kevin, and Jean all are hunched over a phone. It was set on the table and set to speaker phone. Now that Neil was closer he could hear Nicky's panicked voice on the other end.

"I don't know!" Nicky shouted, "I just told him he was being good and left the room!!! He hasn't been acting up this entire time, I just thought- "

Neil had heard enough.

"I don't have to follow your rules!" Neil snarled, "I'm not good. I'm not bad. Act like I'm a dog following your orders again and we'll have a problem."

There is a stunned silence. And Neil hears Wymack groan.

"Kid," Wymack says with a hand over his face, "You are going to make me have a heart attack!"

The rest of the room stands in stunned silence. Andrew still looks as drugged up as ever.

"What?" Neil asked the rest of the room.

Andrew laughs, "So the roadrunner really can run!"

Neil flushes.

"Dude," Aaron says staring at him, "You just ran 5 miles in at the most, 20 minutes."

"And you have more stitches than a goddamn clothing store!" Wymack shouted, "What the fuck were you thinking."

"I was thinking that Nicky doesn't know the meaning of personal space!" Neil snaps.

"So you put 5 miles between the two of you!? Jesus kid! Just say you're uncomfortable and the guy will back off! It's something called communication!"

"I've said stop before and been ignored. I saw no point in trying again," Neil mutters in quiet French.

Jean makes a distressed noise and stares at Kevin in a plea to help.

"It's not like that here!" Kevin says pleadingly, *"If you say no they'll stop. Hell, I doubt any of them would try to start unless it's obvious you wanted something!"*

Neil doesn't look up. He had been in the nest since he was six years old. Having his pleas and no's ignored was a normal part of life. This idea of someone listening to what he wanted, was foreign.

"Sorry," Neil finally says after a moment of silence. "It won't happen again."

Wymack sighed, running a hand through his hair. The tattoos on his arms were shown off with his lack of sleeves.

"If you're already here, then you can just stay and watch them practice," Wymack said, sighing. "You can ride back with me afterwards, I don't want you running home. Do you hear me?"

"Yes Master," Neil said it without thinking, and suddenly the room felt far too cold. Everyone had gone silent. Neil hunched his shoulders ready for Wymack to take a swing.

After a moment Wymack spoke, "It's just 'coach' kid. I'm not the ruler of your world, and I don't delude myself with thinking I ever will be.

"Yes Coach," Neil stated.

He stared at the floor, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Kevin and Jean played as they normally do. At the best they possibly could. Kevin was shaky, using his right hand instead of his left. His aim was no longer as precise.

"Kevin, do you use your right hand outside of practice?" Neil inquired in French once they took a water break. The room paused when Kevin frowned.

"It's not polite to chirp when others can't understand," Andrew said. His hands fiddled with the edge of his armband.

Neil glanced at him, "I just asked if he uses his left hand outside of practice," Neil stated.

"No," Kevin states, "I don't. I still write using my left."

"Switch it," Neil says, glancing back at Kevin, "You treat using your right hand as a foreign affair. It may not be comfortable to use your right hand to do things like writing and pouring yourself a drink, but you need to build up your coordination in that arm. You should start trying to strengthen your right hand too. You should use grips, even a stress ball would work. Your aim is off, and your strength is lower on your right side. If you're switching hands you can't half ass it. Switch hands. Don't lose your left side completely of course, but train your right."

The room is mostly silent, but Jean is moving about like it was the most normal thing in the world. And for Kevin, Neil, and Jean it was.

"Jean," Neil turns towards the Frenchman, who in turn gives Neil his full attention, "You still occasionally check too hard. Checking is great but maintain your own balance at the same time. If you're the closest to the ball you still may need to stand back up and get to it. I'm not back line anymore, I can't sprint in and send it for you like we used to."

Both Kevin and Jean consider his words, before nodding in thanks. And Kevin even switches his water bottle to his left hand to screw the top on with his right.

Wymack had watched silently, "What about Aaron?" Wymack gruffed.

Kevin huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Not good enough for Kevin," Aaron says, " And I'm not good enough for Jean, so I doubt any Raven is going to find me worth their- "

Neil cuts him off, "You're good." Silence follows his words. And Neil takes to inspecting his nails, " You have potential for being a great backliner. Your balance and precision is off but those are both things you can work on. Try balance exercises as you read or study. Things like standing on one leg and then on only the other for longer and longer periods of time. Kevin has plenty of raven drills that help with precision of throws and passes. I would show you but- "

"But you're not stepping on the court until Abby says you won't turn into a blood stain on the floor," Wymack gruffs.

Neil rolls his eyes, " Yeah that. The only other thing would be getting your speed up and learning a more effective tackle."

Aaron stares at Neil with an eyebrow raised.

Neil continues, " You're small," Aaron glares as the words leave Neil's mouth, " I am too. And the tackle you're doing work well enough, but when you're going against someone bigger than you you need to count on more than brute strength. Aim for throwing off their center of gravity. And do so with enough speed."

You could probably hear a pin drop from how silent it was.

Neil finally looks up. Everyone, minus Andrew, we're staring at him in shock.

"Is that really all he needs to improve?" Kevin asked, more to himself than anyone else.

"You've always been bad at training people. You're too," Neil Searches for the words and finally settles on," Kevin."

Kevin glares at Neil like a petulant child, and Jean snorts out in laughter. Quickly covering his mouth to hide it.

"You're no better Jean," Neil flicks his fingers.

Wymack finally turns to Kevin, "Neil has offered to be our striker sub this year. Thoughts?"

Kevin stops glaring and looks at Wymack, the smallest grin on his face, "You're thinking about it?"

"It's been the only thing I've thought about the past few days. He won't be healed enough for me to see him play before I need the contract signed, and I'm trying to figure out if I should take a chance on him. The rest of the team says they trust my judgment but I'm unsure." Wymack stated.

Neil's leg bounced nervously.

"Don't I get a say, Coach?" Andrew asks grinning.

Wymack just says," No."

Kevin doesn't say anything, but pulls his phone out of his bag. Flipping through various things on it. "I saved these as practice material a long time ago," Kevin says, handing Wymack his phone. On it a video was queued up. "Neil was there from the age of six. And

the Master often had him train the freshmen who had less experience. Neil's main position was backliner, but he's been moved around to every position on the court."

"Riko put him on the back line because Neil was a faster striker than him," Jean says.

Jean doesn't mention how when Neil was out performing Riko, Riko had beat Neil until Neil had to be taken to the hospital. They told the doctors he'd been hit by a truck.

Wymack's eyebrows raise, and the man clicks play on the video.

Neil flinches slightly when he hears Riko's voice shouting at him from the video. He remembered the day the video had been taken.

"Stop messing around Nathaniel and actually try," Riko's voice shouted.

"Are you going to be pissy when I shut you down every five seconds," Neil's voice was loud and clear through the speaker of the phone.

Some more argument. Then a whistle.

Neil counted a bit internally.

The Neil in the video began to get into the practice fully. There was the sound of him stick checking, body checking. And there was the sound of Riko getting increasingly incensed every time Neil cleared it. The video was cut off. But Neil knew what had happened after the cameras stopped rolling.

Riko had dragged him into the locker room and handcuffed him to the bench, stripping him naked before leaving.

It hadn't been a fun night.

Neil's right hand absently rubbed over the scars that lay on his wrists from fighting against those handcuffs. That time and every other.

The next video was of Neil playing as a dealer. It wasn't as impressive, but Neil knew it was good enough to earn approval.

There was one of Neil playing Goalie, but Kevin had reached out and skipped the video.

Wymack didn't comment and watched the striker video. Neil was younger, his voice higher. But Neil could still hear his taunts at Riko.

"I thought you said you could keep up!" Neil shouted on the phone.

That hadn't been a good night either.

"Sign him Coach," Kevin said, staring at Wymack. "I promise you it will be the best investment you've ever made for this team."

Wymack stared right back, "Better than you?"

Neil was about to say that nobody was a better investment than Kevin, but Kevin spoke before him. His words stunning him into silence.

"A hundred times better."

Chapter 5

Two days after Kevin's approval of Neil, Wymack threw a stack of papers down in front of him. Neil had startled out of the daze he had been in and stared at the papers in front of them in wonder. It was a contract.

Neil's fingers brushed the top page lightly, his breath caught in his throat.

He had figured that Wymack wouldn't be sending Neil back to Evermore. Two days after meeting the man that had become clear. But he hadn't been sure if Wymack would sign him

And if Wymack hadn't, well Neil really had nowhere else to go.

"It's just a contract kid," Wymack said. But his eyes were studying Neil's reaction.

Neil smiled, but it was a smile full of pain. He could feel years of abuse and pain all in that smile. But he also felt the smallest amount of relief in his heart.

"It's more than that," Neil said, picking up a pen, "It's a chance, it's my life, it's the future. It's more than I've ever been given."

Wymack doesn't respond, but watches as Neil signs his name on the contract.

Neil slowly started getting his stitches taken out, and by extension, was slowly allowed to start exercising more.

As he healed, he couldn't help but notice the Andrew kept Jean and Kevin away from him more and more. It hurt not having the two of them around. And he felt his irritation rise every

time they were pulled or guided away from him. He felt lonely. It was a feeling he was familiar with, but that didn't make it any easier.

Nicky didn't speak to Neil much after the day Neil ran off. Every time he did, Nicky would send hurried and fearful looks towards Andrew.

"Andrew threatened him off you," Aaron said one day as Neil was coaching Aaron on his stance. Nicky had been speaking to Neil about some random thing, but had suddenly stopped and stared at Andrew, before slinking off and staying away from Neil completely.

Neil glanced up, his brows furrowed. "Why?"

"You ask me like you think I understand a damn thing he does," Aaron mutters back, "He's a psychotic asshole. He probably just gets off on the control or something."

Neil shook his head, not commenting. He didn't know Andrew well enough to be able to pick apart his motives.

Neil would show up to the small impromptu practices with Wymack, and he would help and occasionally shove in pointers. In between he'd jog the court, gradually picking up speed as he healed more and more.

Finally Abby removed the last of his stitches. He didn't even wait for her to finish talking to him about getting back into exercise slowly, he was already out the door and sprinting down the street to the court.

He didn't have a key or the code into the court yet, so he climbed through the window again.

"Is this going to become a regular thing?" Wymack being there didn't startle Neil as much this time. He knew it was Wymack's office and so he figured there was a chance the man would be there. But he still tensed, ready for the moment the man decided to beat him.

"Maybe?" Neil said questioningly.

Wymack gave him an unimpressed stare. "Abby already called to tell me you were probably on your way," Wymack said tiredly, "They're out on the court."

Neil nodded his thanks and walked through the door.

Kevin often complained about how orange the court was, and Neil supposed it was a bit of an eyesore. But he himself couldn't help but love the bright vibrant color that covered every wall. It meant he wasn't in the nest again.

Kevin was the first to spot Neil. The taller man looked at Neil expectantly, and when Neil flashed a thumbs up in response Kevin grinned and made his way over to him.

"All the stitches are out then?" Kevin asked.

Neil nodded.

"Good it's about time that I got some more talent on this court," Kevin said gruffly.

Neil rolled his eyes, "You're too hard on your team Kevin. Some people need more guidance than 'you suck, be better'."

Kevin huffed, "Well when they start getting better, I'll stop saying they suck."

"Spoken like a true child."

"I'm older than you!"

Neil waved him off flippantly, "Where's my gear?" Neil asked changing the subject, "Unless of course we are playing Riko's favorite game today."

It was a joke, but Neil has always had a twisted sense of humor. Maybe it was the trauma. Neil smiled as he said the words, but Kevin flinched.

"And what would Riko's favorite game be?" Andrew's voice cut through the air, and Neil looked over to see him lounging lazily on the bench, manic smile in place. Beside him, Aaron, Nicky, and Jean stood.

"It actually wasn't too bad," Neil said when Kevin winced, "Sometimes I'd outperform Riko a bit too much, or I'd mouth off and so Riko would throw me in as a goalkeeper."

"What do you hate being Goalie that bad?" Aaron asked, "Doesn't seem like much of a punishment."

"He'd make Neil go in with no armour, only shorts on. And take away Neil's racket. Then he'd line the entire front line up to take full power shots on goal." Kevin said.

"He made me stop at least 50 or I wouldn't get dinner that night," Neil shrugged. "Like I said, it honestly wasn't too bad. I learned how to block the shots, it hurt like a bitch but it pissed off Riko too. And in the end it was worth it."

The room was silent, even Andrew didn't have anything to say to that. Neil wondered if the guy was imagining what'd be like to block shots with only your unprotected body.

Nicky looked like he was going to be sick, "That's awful," Nicky said, his voice shaking.

Neil shrugged, "It was better than some of the other shit he'd do."

"What could be worse than that?" Aaron asked, "That sounds like hell."

Neil stares for a moment, "I personally disliked when he waterboarded me far more."

Aaron's eyes went wide. "You're joking."

Neil didn't respond, the conversation was getting far too close for comfort.

"So am I changing out?" Neil asked.

Kevin handed Neil a single slip of paper with a locker number and a combination.

Neil took it and changed into his gear.

A few days later Neil was in the middle of his morning run when Wymack pulled up beside him in the road.

"Get in," Wymack said, "I'm taking you to my apartment. I need to talk to you Kevin and Jean without Andrew getting in the way."

Neil nodded and stepped into the car.

"What's going on?" Neil asked as they pulled away from the curb.

"I'll tell you when we get there," Wymack responded.

Neil nodded and made the choice to look out the window. He could still see Wymack in the reflection this way.

The drive didn't take long, and when they stepped through the door of Wymack's apartment, Jean and Kevin were already there.

Wymack shut the door behind him and turned around.

A deep sigh exited the coach's lips.

"The board called me in to discuss some changes that are happening this season. And there is nothing I can do to fight this either. Edgar Allan is moving to our district."

A pained noise exited Kevin's lips, and Jean's eyes went wide in horror.

"He's going to take all three of us back," Kevin said shaking, "I knew it, I knew it was going to happen."

Neil turned and slapped Kevin across the face.

There was a moment of silence.

"What the- "

Neil cut coach off, "Don't insult me like that," Neil hissed, "I have *never* let him have you. I would *never* let him take you back. I got you out, I will keep you out!"

"Neil he will- "

This time it was Jean who spoke, but Neil cut him off too," He won't. If you think I'll let him have you, then you got stupid in your time here. Plus now it's not just me, It's Wymack and Andrew too! And I bet all the foxes will be ready to back you up as well. He's not getting you, and honestly I'd like to see him try to."

"I need you three to keep this from Andrew for the time being," Wymack says, but he is giving Neil a searching look," The ERC is looking for every reason to get him removed, and I'm afraid he'll give them one if we tell him now."

"We can't just-"

Neil cut Kevin off again, "You can. If he tries to say something, blame the coach and myself. If you tell him now and he gets kicked off then you lose his protection."

"I'm an awful liar."

"Then get better."

The room was silent. Then, "What about you?" Kevin spoke quietly, " I don't want to see things end up like at the nest again."

Neil waved his hand, as if to show Kevin how unimportant that train of thought was.

"If you're safe it doesn't matter," Neil said.

"It does to us," Jean said.

Jean wasn't meeting Neil's eyes, instead his eyes were pointed at the floor.

"We care about you," Jean said," And we had to watch you get ripped apart every single day so that you could protect us."

"It was worth it," Neil shrugged," I don't regret a second of it. I'll do it again if I need to. You guys are all I have, and I won't let him get you."

Wymack made it as if he wanted to speak, but Neil shoved past him and out the door.

Neil started at a light jog towards the court, but it ended with a full out sprint.

Edgar Allan was coming. *Riko* was coming.

Neil tried to ignore the tremor that it sent through his hands. Tried to ignore the fact that he couldn't breathe.

As long as Jean and Kevin were kept safe, nothing else mattered.

He could handle the abuse.

He could handle it.

Neil eventually made it to the court. He still didn't have a key, so he crawled through the office window yet again.

He geared up and began to run drill after drill. He didn't stop when the others showed up. He didn't stop when someone tried to speak with him.

Whatever he did he didn't stop moving.

Somehow he had figured that Riko wouldn't just lay down and wait for the end of the year. But still, the knowledge that he was coming, was almost too much to bear.

Neil shot another ball into the goal, and he watched as the light lit up red.

Chapter 6

Neil felt his nerves grow every moment that he got closer to meeting the rest of the foxes. The anxiety he felt even chased him to his dreams.

He knew this wasn't Edgar Allan, but what if it was no different here.

Kevin and Jean claimed it wasn't but that didn't stop the wave of anxiety that passed over Neil as the days began to tick down.

The night before meeting the rest of the foxes, Neil shot up in bed drenched in sweat. His mind still echoing remnants of the dream he had had.

"You think they'll allow a whore like you to stay, you'll be back with me in no time Nate."

"Disgusting."

"Ruined."

"Unlovable."

"Nothing."

Neil scrambled out of the bed with a hard thunk, landing on his knees and wincing in pain. No one else in the house moved, so it was likely that none of the others had woken up.

Neil breathed.

"Pretty boy"

Neil breathed.

"Princess."

Neil *breathed*.

"Slut."

No matter what Neil tried to tell himself internally, the short erratic breaths exiting his lips weren't him breathing at all.

He tried counting.

1

"Bend over."

2

"Behave or I'll move on to Jean."

3

"Whores don't get to say no."

Neil clenched his eyes shut and pressed his forehead against the floor.

He needed quiet. He needed peace. He needed to run.

He was climbing out the window in moments, starting at a light jog, and then escalating until he ran so hard that he thought his legs might fall right off.

He wasn't sure what time it was when he got to the court. But yet again he crawled through the window of Wymack's office and then exited the office to get to the court.

No one was there, so he geared up and set out some cones. He ran precision drills until the racket flew out of his hands.

"You'll pay for that Nate."

He shot on goal until his arms felt like they might fall right off.

"Handcuff him... Do his legs too."

He ran laps until his chest burned.

"So many scars. You're so ugly Princess."

He put the gear away and ran the steps in the stands until his knees slammed into the ground. He let out a short pained sound. His breathing was still a chore. The panic in his chest did not disappear.

He looked at his arms. There were four long vertical scars on each forearm, remains of his suicide attempt two years prior. There were newer scars on his hips, and Neil's mind briefly floated to his knives that he had brought with him.

He wasn't very good at using knives on others, he'd left before his father's lessons really did much good. But he could use them on himself expertly.

He hadn't done it since coming to Palmetto though, and doing it now seemed like a betrayal to Kevin and Jean.

Even though he had never promised anyone to stop. It still felt like a betrayal to his brothers.

Finally, as Neil thought about Kevin and Jean, his breath began to slow and even out.

He stumbled to his feet and fell into one of the stadium chairs heavily. Allowing himself to stare at the orange of the court.

His eyes began to droop, and he felt himself starting to nod off.

A hand in his hair woke him. And Neil's mind went haywire, his elbow flew back connecting with flesh and he dove out of his seat on top of his attacker, pinning them to the ground.

Hardened hazel eyes met Neil's blue panicked ones, and Neil schooled his expression in time to get shoved hard off of Andrew.

Andrew wasn't smiling his usual smile, his eyes were emotionless.

Neil realized that Andrew was off his meds.

"Don't wake me up," Neil snarled at Andrew. His heart was racing in his chest.

Neil saw a glint of silver in Andrew's hands only for a second, then it was gone.

Andrew didn't say anything, he just gave Neil a searching look before settling down in a seat further up and watching the court.

Jean and Kevin were setting up cones and were geared up to practice. Neil briefly thought about joining them, but instead he walked up a few rows so that he could sit while still having Andrew in his peripheral vision.

They sat in silence for a while, both watching the two ex-ravens on the court with a sort of half focus.

"Do you always wake up with intent to kill?" Andrew's question caught Neil off guard. "Seems like overkill for someone who just hates being woken up."

Neil sat not answering.

Andrew stood up and made his way over to Neil, plopping down in the seat next to him.

"I asked you a question," Andrew said dangerously.

"I chose not to answer," Neil snarled back.

More silence followed. Then Andrew kicked his legs up on the chair in front of him.

"You'll be coming to Columbia with us this weekend," Andrew says. His tone allowed no room for an argument. But yet Neil still bared his teeth.

"I see no reason why I should," Neil responded.

"It will make me want to kill you less," Andrew said.

"You don't scare me," Neil responded, "So I don't really care if you want to kill me or not."

Neil pulled at the ends of his sleeves, making sure they fully covered his arms. Andrew had a strange ability to make Neil feel exposed and watched.

"You're awfully suicidal for a person who made a prison break from the nest," Andrew said.
"How about this, you go on Friday and if all goes well, I stop keeping you away from them."

Neil's breath caught, he missed his brothers. He wanted nothing more than to be able to talk to Kevin and Jean like old times, but Andrew had been keeping the two ex-ravens as far from Neil as possible.

One night with Andrew and his group, and in exchange he got to speak with Kevin and Jean again.

"One night," Neil agreed. Before sinking into his seat. His eyes didn't close. There was no way that he could fall asleep in Andrew's presence. But he allowed himself to drift, and he stayed in the seat until early the next morning, long after Kevin, Jean, and Andrew left.

Once the early morning light began to float through the windows at the top of the stadium, Neil got back into running drills.

He ran and he ran. He fired and he fired. He threw and he threw.

A sharp whistle interrupted him, and Neil's head snapped up. Eyes meeting with a man who was much taller than himself.

"You must be the new guy!" The male said when Neil approached, "I'm Matt."

Matt stuck out his hand for Neil to shake and Neil did so.

The guy was like an oversized puppy, and Neil felt his shoulders relax just a bit in his presence.

"It sounds like you're going to be rooming with Seth and I this year," Matt said smiling, "Seth is a bit of an ass but I'll do my best to keep him in line."

Neil nodded, really unsure how to handle genuine kindness.

Luckily he was saved by Wymack coming out of his office.

"Hello to you too!" Wymack said sarcastically. "Did the summer air make you forget how to wave and say hello?"

"You looked busy," Matt defended himself, "I didn't want to interrupt you."

Wymack was about to respond, but his eyes fell on Neil.

"When the fuck did you get here?" Wymack asked.

Neil shrugged, "Last night."

Wymack sighed before digging into his pocket and pulling out a set of keys. "I finally got these made so that you aren't crawling through windows anymore."

Neil caught the keys when they were thrown to him and he stared at them for a moment. Wymack didn't wait for a thank you or a response, but instead flicked a credit card to Matt.

"Since you're both here, take this little asshole shopping before you go back to the dorm, he's been borrowing clothes and shit, but he needs stuff of his own. Today." Wymack states.

"I can go by myself," Neil protests.

"You spent the night on the court and you have a habit of running off, you get a babysitter."

Neil opened his mouth to protest again, but Wymack pointed at the door, "Go."

Neil shuts his mouth and follows Matt out to a truck that was parked in front of the stadium. Neil climbed into the passenger seat and Matt got into the driver's seat before driving off.

"So... A raven?" Matt asked, trying to start a conversation.

Neil nodded. He wasn't very good at small talk.

"How come we've never heard of you?" Matt asks.

Neil shrugged, "You wouldn't have unless you went to Evermore's Exy page online. There's a whole area for up and comers. We don't tend to get a lot of media attention, but hardcore Evermore fans would know me on the street. I was marked for perfect court so a lot of fans watched my high school matches. Evermore was probably careful to keep me off the radar of other colleges though."

"You must be pretty good if they were trying that hard to keep you," Matt said, "Not that that turned out wonderful for them."

Neil grinned, almost satisfied in a way, "Yeah I am pretty sure they were sitting bricks when another member of their perfect court walked out the door. Especially when I was number Three of all people."

Matt let out a laugh.

The rest of the drive Matt prattled on about various things. And Neil did his best to keep up. But eventually Neil let Matt's words soothe him into a feeling of ease.

They moved quickly at the store, as Matt said he had to pick up Dan and Renee from the airport after they got into the dorm. Matt grabbed a few outfits in Neil's size. Neil tried them on. Neil picked out a few more, along with a pair of boots that he could hide his knives inside easier. After that, they moved on and grabbed Neil a set of sheets. Then they began throwing various groceries into the cart. Neil added an assortment of fruits whilst skipping over the vegetables. And when they finally went to check out, Matt swiped the credit card Wymack had given them before bagging up their stuff.

Getting settled into the dorm took longer than shopping. Neil and Matt struggled quite a bit with moving Matt's stuff in. The stairs alone had the two of them panting and cursing as they tried to carry heavy furniture around the bends.

Eventually they got settled though, and Neil set out on making his bed as Matt picked up his keys and headed for the airport.

Neil had about 4 more hours before he had to be at the court to meet all the foxes, so he took advantage of the empty room and slept.

Neil's eyes opened to the sound of whispers, and when he opened his eyes to a face right in front of his own, he struck out. Smashing his fist into the face of the person who had been standing over him.

"Fuck!" Nicky's voice echoed through the room and Neil had his knife in his hand in 2 seconds. He pointed it at Nicky and waited for the other man to move.

A hand wrapped around his wrist and squeezed causing Neil to drop the weapon.

"Children shouldn't play with knives," Andrew's voice was next to his ear and Neil smashed his head in that direction. He leapt off the bed and pressed his back to the wall, so no more people could surprise him.

Aaron, Nicky, and Andrew all stood in his room. Nicky was stumbling to his feet. And Andrew was holding onto his nose, a grin still plastered on his face.

"Fuck you," Neil growled to hide his panic.

He snatched his knife up from the ground and flipped it closed.

"We were trying to wake you up," Aaron said gruffly.

Nicky groaned, *"Why didn't you tell me he wakes up like you?"* Nicky asked the words in German, and Neil flinched at the familiar language.

Andrew didn't respond, but he allowed his hand to finally drop to his side. His face was already starting to bruise.

"You're riding with us to the court," Andrew finally said, "Jean and Kevin already left in Jean's car, and I decided to be friendly and have you ride with us."

"Nothing about you is friendly," Neil spat out. He glared at Andrew.

Andrew flicked his fingers, "I have a time limit on getting you there before Dan decides to turn around and come check on you, so hurry up."

Neil stands and grabs a pair of shorts and a long sleeved shirt, he makes his way to the bathroom to change and when he's done he meets the cousins outside the door of his dorm.

The drive is silent, and Neil half expects the gesture was made just to put Neil on edge. It wouldn't be at all surprising.

The locker room is a swell of noise and energy when they arrive. And Andrew points at Neil whilst looking at one of the girls.

"See Dan," Andrew points at Neil, "One piece as promised."

The aforementioned Dan gives Neil a once over, which Neil ignored in favor of finding himself a seat.

He finally settled on one that was slightly outside the circle of foxes. It put his back to a wall, and it allowed for full vision of the entire room.

Neil looked out at the foxes who were in the room. Most of them seemed to take his quiet demeanor as he wanted them to, and left him well enough alone.

Jean seemed to be having a conversation with Renee Walker. Nicky had given Neil a run down of all the players on the team at some point. But Neil really hadn't listened. Riko had researched the foxes liberally after Kevin had left the nest. Riko knew more about the foxes than the general populace probably did, and by association, Neil did as well.

Dan was talking with Matt animatedly but she was sending glances over to Neil constantly. Andrew sat next to Kevin, who was nervously playing with the fingers of his left hand.

Neil remembered that today was the day Andrew would find out about the district change and he set that note aside in his mind, prepared for any fallout that might bring.

Another twenty minutes passed, Wymack checking his watch every two minutes with an annoyed expression. And finally the last two foxes walked in the door.

Alison Reynolds was dressed up far too well for something as small as this team meeting, and she carried herself with an air of confidence that was almost suffocating. Behind her was Seth Gordon. Seth was tall and had plenty of attitude to go along with that height.

The first thing he did upon entering was scoff at Jean and Nicky. The action had Neil sitting poised on the edge of his seat, but he didn't move.

Seconds later he did, because an arm had wrapped around his shoulder and there was a warm breath on his neck.

Neil leapt out of the chair like it was on fire and he pressed his back against the lockers.

Allison fell into the chair with as much grace as Neil got up and she yelped in surprise.

"Don't touch me," Neil stated coldly. He gritted his teeth and tried to get rid of the feeling on his skin. There wasn't much he could do with everyone watching him.

"Jesus Christ!" Allison muttered irritated, "Just what we need. Another weirdo on the team."

"I'm not weird for having boundaries," Neil spits.

"Boundaries against women? What? Are you a faggot too?" Seth spits the words like they are a disease. And from the corner of Neil's eye he sees Jean flinch.

The knife leaves Neil's hand and embeds itself in the wall next to Seth's head before Neil realizes he drew it.

A moment of surprise washes over him that he'd actually hit the target, but he recovers quickly.

"I don't like that word," Neil snarls, "You will not use that word when referring to Jean. In fact I'd drop it from your vocabulary entirely. You don't need it."

The room is silent, and Seth stares at Neil with wide eyes.

Neil takes a brief moment to be thankful he actually hit where he'd wanted to with the knife, it meant his words carried more weight.

The entire room, minus Wymack, stared at Neil.

"Kid," Wymack says tiredly, "Could you, for one day, not make me lose anymore hair!"

Neil walks to get his knife, but Wymack takes it first.

"You'll get it back when there isn't anyone you can throw it at," Wymack says.

Neil just stares at him, "You know I have more."

Wymack runs a hand over his face muttering, "This team is going to take me to an early grave." Before turning to Neil and snapping out, "Sit down."

Neil leans back up against the locker and slides down to sit on the floor.

"First order of business," Wymack says pointing at Neil, "Our new striker sub. Neil Wesninski. Do you want to say anything?"

Neil opens his mouth.

"If it's going to be a smartass comment, shove it back up your ass."

Neil closes his mouth.

"Anyone else? Concerns? Questions?" Wymack asks.

"He just threw a knife at me!!!" Seth shouts.

"I threw it at the wall next to you," Neil says dryly. "I wasn't aiming at you. If I had hit you it would have been because I have terrible aim."

Wymack just sighs and puts his head in his hands.

"Not to mention the fact that he's a raven," Allison mutters, "Anyone else wondering why we are getting so many refugees lately? I'm smelling something fishy."

"I think that's just your perfume," Neil snarks back.

Wymack points, "Did you by any chance come with a fucking muzzle."

Neil stares, "No."

"Then shut the fuck up so I don't have to buy one." Wymack says annoyed.

"How did you get out?" Dan asked. "Jean and Kevin say it's near impossible to do. They got help from someone else. So how'd you get out."

Neil stared at her, "Don't worry about it. It's nothing that will affect anyone here."

Allison speaks up, "All the same we'd like to decide that for our- "

"No," Neil snaps, "Some things people just don't share even once in their lifetime, and this is one of those things. It's my business, and it won't affect any of you."

Allison's mouth opens and Neil speaks again before she has a chance.

"Unless you want to share all the dark parts of your past, stay out of mine," Neil spits.

Allison shuts her mouth. Her jaw set angrily.

Neil fidgets uncomfortably. He had never been good at first impressions.

Wymack sighs, "If that's done there's just one more thing."

The room turns to him in attention.

"Edgar Allan is moving to our district," Wymack says tiredly.

There is a sudden and loud influx of noise as the foxes all voice their opposition.

Wymack holds up his hand, "There is nothing I can do to stop it."

Jean and Kevin sat silent on either side of Andrew. And Andrew looked between them, realization dawning on his face.

"You two knew and didn't tell me?" The manic smile was on Andrew's face.

"I told them not to," Wymack said, "If you're going to blame someone for that, blame me."

Kevin began muttering something quietly to Andrew, and Andrew responded.

"Kevin I don't like liars."

Jean sat stock still, his hands shaking.

"He's going to get us," Kevin said finally, "He's going to take us back."

Andrew went to speak, but Neil was faster.

"I already told you he won't," Neil said. Neil sets his head against the locker tiredly.

It was real now. The game was starting.

"None of the people in this room are gonna let him have you," Neil spoke.

The rest of the foxes nodded in assent, and Neil watched as the tension in Kevin's shoulders drained away.

Andrew however was staring at Neil, calculatingly.

"If that's all," Wymack said, "Then you can go. Make sure you fill out these forms and turn them in, and get your physical done before you leave. If you haven't done both you can't play. Now get the fuck out of my locker room, and for the love of God, No more fighting."

"Come get your physicals guys, I'll try to move as quickly as possible so you all can head back to the dorms and sleep. Neil I already did yours a few weeks ago so you are good to go." Abby spoke kindly, in stark contrast to the feeling of the room.

Neil felt everyone's eyes on him as he got up and left. No one tried to stop him. And a feeling of loneliness settled in his soul.

I keep forgetting but, come join the Fanfiction Corner [Discord](#).

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

TW: Everything. Noncon Drugging. Just be careful. Neil is having flashbacks. It's Columbia my guys.

It became obvious by day three of practices that none of the foxes trusted him. Matt still tried to be nice, but there was a hesitancy to how he spoke with Neil that Matt was terrible at hiding. Seth didn't even try to speak with Neil after the first meeting, and the relationship with his roommates was making sleep an impossible battle to win.

Allison was constantly making snide comments. Dan tried to kind as well, but she made a point to never have her back to Neil. Renee also tried to be kind, but ultimately she made a point to never let a fox be with Neil by themselves.

Nicky still stayed pretty far from Neil, Aaron didn't even bother speaking with him outside of practices. And of course Andrew kept Kevin and Jean as far away as possible.

Neil could hear the way conversations would drop off when he entered a room. And he could see the way the foxes eyed him warily.

The whole thing made him feel vulnerable, and cornered. Like around the next bend the foxes would finally snap and hold him down and-

Neil rubbed at his temples trying to calm his raging headache. The court was still dark, he'd been arriving to practices early so that he could change without being questioned about his scars, and so he wouldn't have to corner himself in the showers when everyone else was there. No one seemed to mind that he would spend an extra three hours after practice, before packing up and running back.

Well, he's sure Kevin and Jean were concerned. But Andrew wouldn't let them near enough for them to say anything.

All together the foxes seemed to leave Neil alone off the court. However on the court was a different story.

The foxes' dynamic made Neil question whether Ichirou would even allow him to survive the year. The entire group was a volatile and split mess. The first week of summer training was nothing but a constant slew of fights.

Seth was the main contender for who could start the most, though Kevin was right behind him in a close second.

Dan tried to lead the team and keep the mighty to a bare minimum, and for the most part the foxes would listen. But it would only take ten minutes before something was muttered, and a new fight would break out.

While Seth left Neil alone off the court, he was a constant unyielding asshole on. Neil was a bit rusty in the striker position and while he wasn't awful, he wasn't perfect. Seth made it a point to call out every mistake Neil made.

Kevin of course was as bad a teacher as he normally was, and he turned to frustration more often than genuine advice and help.

Allison wouldn't pass to him. Dan would but she also didn't try and communicate with him. The rest of the team ignored him.

Altogether the only real words he got were ones of hatred, biting anger, and frustrations

By the time the weekend rolled around, Neil was feeling lost and adrift. Unsure if this was truly better than Edgar Allan at all.

No one had bent him over and forced anything yet, so Neil figured in that way it was better.

Neil just wanted to have Jean and Kevin on his side again, no matter how selfish that may have been. So when Nicky came to the door Friday night, Neil was already there.

Nicky looked surprised when Neil met him at the door.

"Neil hey!" Nicky said with a smile. "Andrew said to give you these."

Neil stared at the bag and raised an eyebrow, "Why?"

"We kind of figured you wouldn't know how to dress so we got you clothes for the occasion. Andrew's orders." Nicky responded.

Neil stared at him, "I have clothes for the occasion, just because I like to dress comfortably, doesn't mean I don't have street clothes."

Neil wasn't allowed out much at Evermore, but when he was he dressed in his best "Don't fuck with me attire" as he walked alongside Kevin and Jean. It probably was amusing to see the shortest of the group also being the badass of the group. But he doubted it would even phase Nicky with having Andrew around.

Nicky stared at Neil as if he didn't believe him, and Neil shrugged and led the way back to the bedroom. He pulled out the boots he had gotten when he and Matt went shopping, along with ripped black jeans that had chains coming off of them. And finally a long sleeve black turtleneck.

Nicky stared at Neil.

" *You own clothes like that ?*"

Neil shrugged. He didn't think it was that strange.

"Is it not good enough?" Neil asked.

Nicky seemed to stumble over his response, "No that's actually... uh... better than what we brought you. I'll wait out with Matt and Seth while you change.

Neil nodded and waited until Nicky was out to slip out of his current clothes and into his new ones. They were tighter than he was comfortable with, but the vibe they gave off made Neil feel protected enough to roll with it. They hugged his body and the chains on his pants swung with the sway of his hips.

Neil went to open the door and join Nicky, but he halted when he heard the hushed conversation.

"You're taking him to Columbia tonight aren't you?" Dan's voice asked.

"I still think this is wrong, we should at least warn him or something," Matt's voice cut in next.

"For once I actually agree with the monster, he's not trustworthy. He shows up at the same time as this district change. A raven wanting to be a fox. Has anyone else noticed how he is the first of all three raven's we've got, that it isn't a fight to keep him here?" Allison speaks next.

"We could just ask for the truth," Renee says, *"What if we are all wrong about him and this causes some kind of damage. This doesn't feel right."*

"I say let him get damaged," Seth throws in, "Little asshole threw a knife at me I say he deserves it."

Neil felt sick to his stomach and uneasy, but he leaned his head against the door and continues to listen.

"He doesn't act like he's had the torment of Evermore either." Allison threw in. "He's odd but he actually seems stable. Nothing adds up with him."

Neil almost threw his head back and laughed at that comment. Never before had he thought "stable" and himself belonged in the same sentence. It sounded wrong coming off Allison's tongue.

Neil figured he'd had enough of hearing himself get dragged, and he opened the door. Conversation halted and he could feel the foxes eyeing him warily.

Nicky however was grinning and sent a wink at Neil whilst giving him a once-over.

Neil felt his skin crawl and he spoke before Nicky had the chance to say something inappropriate.

"Can we go?" Neil asked impatiently.

He waited for one of the upperclassmen to butt in and warn him about this, apparently, dangerous trip he was about to take. But everyone watched silently. Complacent.

That made Neil's skin crawl too. He couldn't help but notice the parallels to the nest as he walked to where Aaron and Andrew stood in the hallway.

"Guys look at him," Nicky said in German, "He looks amazing. Aaron don't let me drink too much tonight. Though maybe after a few drinks in him he will-"

"I should tell you now, before you think you continue to embarrass yourself," Neil says still walking towards the exit, never missing a beat, *"I speak German too."*

It seemed to stun Nicky into silence. And the rest of the group weren't much for talking, so they all headed down the stairs.

Kevin and Jean were waiting in Jean's car, parked alongside Andrew's.

Jean had taken his car from Edgar Allan when he left. The empty spot had been a reminder to Riko for weeks that Jean had gone, and it never failed to have him taking his anger out as best he could on Neil without leaving marks.

Andrew reached to put a hand on Neil's shoulder and Neil stepped away. Andrew reached again and Neil grabbed Andrew's wrist.

Silence fell around them. Andrew's aversion to touch was just as bad as Neil's own. Grabbing Andrew's wrist like this was a deathwish.

But Neil hardened his eyes and looked at Andrew's. Andrew was staring at the hand around his wrist like he could burn it off, and Neil waited until Andrew met Neil's gaze.

"Don't. Touch. Me." Neil enunciated each word carefully, and he never lifted his gaze from Andrew's eyes. Neil dropped Andrew's wrist as soon as he finished talking and took another step back for good measure.

Andrew's attention was set fully on him. His gaze was hard, despite the smile still placed on his face.

Neil waited for Andrew to reach again, but Andrew just stared at him another moment before nodding to Jean's car.

"Nicky and Aaron are in one, Jean, Kevin, myself, and you are riding in the other," Andrew says the instructions like he knows they will be followed. And they are.

Nicky and Aaron head immediately to Andrew's vehicle. Kevin and Jean are already in their vehicle, so when Andrew climbs into the backseat, Neil is the only one left standing outside a car. He hesitates for only a moment.

He had agreed to one night of playing by Andrew's rules. Then he would get to have Jean and Kevin back.

That's all it took for Neil to climb into the backseat of Jean's car and buckle his seatbelt.

As they drove Andrew fell asleep. Neil was tired as well, almost a week of staying up because he couldn't sleep in the company of Seth and Matt was catching up to him. But Neil couldn't sleep when there was too much unknown about the night.

His leg bounced nervously as Jean led the two cars on the way to Columbia. Neil could probably have spoken to Jean and Kevin then. But he knew tonight was by Andrew's rules and Andrew's alone. And he'd promised Andrew one night.

When they finally started pulling off on an exit ramp, Andrew woke up bleary and his hands shaking. Neil watched as Andrew gripped the back of Jean's seat.

"Jean pullover," Andrew said through gritted teeth.

Jean did so without question, and Andrew threw the door open and began heaving onto the ground. He stayed there until he'd finished coughing up the last of it, and then he climbed back into the car.

The first place they stopped was a restaurant called Sweeties. The parking lot was nearly full when they pulled up, but they managed to find two spots for both their vehicles.

Andrew's state only seemed to deteriorate as they got inside. His entire body was quaking as he sat at their table, gripping hard at the edge as if he could keep himself grounded. The smile was slowly sinking off of Andrew's face.

Kevin pulled out a bottle of pills, "Just take it."

"Fuck you," Andrew ground out.

Neil could hear Nicky ordering something from the waitress, but his thoughts were stuck on the fact that Andrew was purposefully making himself sober for the night to come.

The thought sent chills down Neil's spine.

When the waitress finally came back, she placed a large amount of napkins onto the table, and then placed ice cream in front of each of them.

The sight of the dessert made Neil want to bolt.

"Sweet things are going to cost you Nate."

Neil's hand gripped the table harder, he almost missed Andrew sifting through the napkins to grab at something underneath. But when he saw what Andrew was going for he blanched internally.

"Take your medicine like a good boy Nathaniel."

Neil recognized that people were talking around him, but his hands were a white knuckled grip on the table.

Neil met Kevin's eyes. Kevin was staring at Neil, his eyes wide. He was staring at Neil with a look of understanding.

"You should try the ice cream!" Neil finally hears Nicky's cheerful voice.

Neil shakes his head, "Ice cream makes me sick."

It wasn't a lie. Neil wasn't lactose-intolerant, but practically every time he'd been given dessert in the nest, he had been forced to his knees after. Now ice cream had a bitter disgusting taste to it that made Neil's insides clench. Just thinking about it made the taste explode inside Neil's mouth.

Nicky makes a surprised noise that mixes with distress. "How do you live!?" Nicky asks, staring at Neil wide eyed.

Neil shrugged.

Andrew ended up taking Neil's ice cream. The smile had left his face completely, and he watched Neil with every bite of ice cream he took.

Finally they paid, Aaron attached a clip of 20's to the stack of napkins and they headed out.

Eden's Twilight was loud when they arrived. Jean and Nicky waited for VIP car passes while Andrew led Aaron, Kevin, and Neil inside.

Kevin and Aaron chose a table, and Andrew gestured for Neil to follow him to the bar.

The bartender was busy with other patrons when they got up there, but when he saw Andrew the bartender grinned and held up a finger.

"Hey Andrew!" The bartender greeted, "What can I get for you tonight?"

"The usual Roland," Andrew responds

Roland's eyes flick to Neil, "Who's your friend?"

"Nobody," Andrew responds.

Roland grins, "Well does 'Nobody' want something to drink?"

Andrew stares at Neil in question, and Neil panics slightly. "Not alcohol."

Roland nods, "Soda then."

"You can't have that Nathaniel."

Neil says the words before he thinks, "I'm not allowed to have soda."

Andrew and the bartender stare at him. Roland's face is now that of hesitancy.

Neil stumbles, "Actually... uh... Soda is fine."

Neil fidgets with the edge of his sleeves, trying to ensure that they are pulled down over his hands.

Roland comes back with their drinks and offers Neil one more searching look, before turning a searching one on Neil.

They head back to the table and the drinks are already being piled down before Andrew even drops the tray.

Neil drinks his soda, trying to ignore the fear in places inside him to do so.

He drinks his soda until it's gone, the overly sweet taste causing his stomach to twist.

Andrew sends Kevin, Jean, Nicky, and Aaron off to dance.

Another soda is placed in front of him and he drinks that one two.

Then the room begins to shift. Neil's stomach bottoms out as realization settles in. Neil's mind halts. He stops being able to think rationally.

The drink is drugged. That means Riko is here.

"Take your medicine Nathaniel."

"Leave them alone."

Kevin and Jean. Need to protect Kevin and Jean.

Neil stumbles away from the table, dodging Andrew's hand. He looks frantically around before turning back to Andrew frantically. He stumbles. But keeps his footing.

"We need to find them, Riko is here, he's gonna hurt them," Neil's mind is blurring at the edges and all he knows is his current mission.

Kevin, Jean.

"The drugs make you so pliant Nate."

No.

Neil grips the table searching and ignoring Andrew's attempts at getting his attention.

Kevin, Jean.

"Say please Nathaniel. Beg."

" Please no."

Neil stumbles off, moving quickly and disappearing into the mass of moving bodies.

There were hands everywhere, and Neil's skin crawled as he stumbled.

Neil stumbled straight into the arms of Nicky.

"Don't fight it," Nicky says.

"Don't fight or I'll hurt them."

Neil goes boneless in Nicky's arms falling to the floor.

"Neil!"

Neil can't stop. He stumbles to his feet, swaying. The colors of the room are far too pronounced. The sound is too loud. The hands were everywhere.

Neil pushes his way through the mass of bodies. Stumbling until he reaches the bar. Someone grabs his waist and pulls him against their chest.

Neil can't breathe, he can't think. They are saying something. But Neil can't process it. His hands are shaking.

A hand clamped over his mouth and he swallows something that is put in his mouth.

His eyes find Roland, who is staring at the scene in horror.

Neil realizes that he's fighting, but not winning.

Neil looks to find Roland again, but the bartender is gone. Nobody is behind the counter.

"Come on pretty boy," a voice whispers in his ear, "Let's step outside."

Neil kicks. He tries to scream. Tries to get away. But suddenly the room is even slower than before. It's even harder to breathe than it had been. He's exhausted. His mind supplies that he has to find Kevin and Jean.

Kevin and Jean.

"Hurry up and get his pants off."

"No stop!"

"Whores don't say no baby boy."

Please.

Where were Kevin and Jean.

"Let him go or I'll cut you both open."

"I'm gonna make you BLEED Nathaniel."

Pain. Trembling. Fear.

Kevin and Jean.

"Where... Kevin Jean?"

Neil's words come out slurred. His entire body shakes. He feels a hand slapping his face a bunch of times.

Andrew sat in front of him, focused on Neil's face.

"Focus," Andrew says simply, "Do you know what they gave you?"

"Take your medicine Nathaniel."

Foggy, No control. Can't protect them.

Neil's mind floats in and out, but he forces himself to reign in.

"Where are Kevin and Jean? We need to find them. We need to find them now. Riko- "

"Riko isn't here," Andrew says, "I need you to focus and tell me what those assholes put in your system."

"I am your King! Do as I say!"

No. Don't. Leave me alone.

Neil trembles, "You don't understand," Neil's words came out slurred, "The drink was drugged. That means Riko is here. He's gonna hurt 'em. You need to get 'em out," Neil's chest heaves with the effort it's taking to talk, "You need to get 'em out of 'ere. I'll distract... I'll distract him."

"Stop talking and focus." Andrew says, "I already sent them back to the house with Aaron and Nicky. Riko isn't here. I was the one who drugged you."

Neil's veins turn to ice. But finally Riko's voice quiets in his mind. Neil's voice exits as a shaky whisper. "Does that mean you're going to fuck me?"

Silence settled over the alleyway. And Andrew's jaw clenched.

Neil expected to get hit, but instead Andrew just repeated the question he'd been asking, "Do you know what they gave you?"

Neil shook his head.

The brief moment of clarity Andrew had given him with his words disappeared when there was a loud bang. Neil flinched and his mind snapped.

"Nathaniel!"

"Please stop."

"I need to get to Kevin and Jean."

"I'll hurt them Nathaniel."

Pain. Blood. Fear.

Neil could barely think as Andrew practically carried Neil out of the alley. The car ride was a blur. And as soon as they pulled up to the house, Neil was out the door of the car before the car even stopped. He hit the pavement, skinning his hands on the ground and wincing as his knees hit the ground hard. Someone tried to grab at him from behind but Neil sent an elbow back causing them to wheeze.

Neil was slamming through the door of the house in seconds.

"Jesus Christ!" Nicky says jumping up. Neil pushes past him and stumbles over to Kevin and Jean.

Kevin stares at him wide eyed, and then glares at something behind Neil.

Kevin's here. Make sure Kevin's okay.

"I told you not to drug him!!!"

Kevin's words were unimportant. Neil's hands went to Kevin's face, prodding at his head, his neck, and his arms. Kevin finally seemed to notice what Neil was doing.

"What is he doing?" Aaron's voice floated in one ear and out the other.

"He's checking us for injuries," Jean responded shakily.

Unimportant words.

Neil checked each of Kevin's fingers. Stopping when Kevin winced on his left hand.

He's hurt. He's hurt. You've failed again.

Neil pointed at Jean shaking, close to breaking.

"He needs ice," Neil says simply before sitting Kevin down on a couch. Jean brings back a bag of ice and Neil puts it on Kevin's hand before stumbling down and checking Kevin's knees, ankles, and feet."

Neil moves to Jean, pulling the same routine all over again.

Make sure they are safe. Check, check. Head. Knees. Shoulders. Hands. Feet. Nose. Ears. Ribs.

"Jesus Christ when is he gonna notice he's the only one that's fucking injured," a voice said irritated.

Jean gave Neil a glance. "He won't. He doesn't care."

I don't matter. I don't matter.

A broken noise sounded from behind Neil. Then a hand settled on Neil's shoulder.

Neil went rigid, "Don't hurt them," he whispers his eyes blown wide, "I promise I'll be good. Please don't hurt them."

Be good Nathaniel.

The hand is off him in seconds and then Neil is distracted by Jean. Who looks two seconds from throwing up.

Protect. Protect. Protect.

"Go to the room," Neil says he stumbles to his feet before tripping and crashing to the floor," The chair... use the chair. I'll guard the door." Neil's mind is in tatters as he tries to stand. The room is too bright.

Jean and Kevin follow his rules.

"It's fine," Kevin tells someone angrily, "Look this is the only way he'll calm down enough to sleep this off."

Neil doesn't understand, but soon they are inside the room and Neil positions himself in front of the door. He sucks air into his lungs, trying to breathe. He grips his hair. And eventually he gives into the darkness at the edges of his vision.

His nightmares are full of his own screams.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

People were so kind about the Columbia chapter. It's so hard to believe people when they say my writing is good but God it still makes me feel so happy ^_^.

My one friend freaked out when I smiled at my phone because I am an andreil love child and I was playing with knives while doing so.

Congrats on making me terrify my friend guys. And also thank you for the support.

Neil awoke on a cold hard floor and with a familiar pounding in his head, and for a moment he panicked. He was back in the nest, and he was late for practice. Riko was going to-

“You aren’t in the nest,” A familiar voice broke through his panic, and Neil’s gaze snapped up to Andrew. Andrew’s face was twisted into an expression of discomfort, he hadn’t taken his drugs yet. There was no smile on his face.

Neil felt himself tense, “Where are Kevin and Jean? Are they safe? Did they get hurt?”

Andrew glared at Neil, “What do you remember from last night?”

Neil glared right back, “Answer my question first.”

Andrew stared for a moment, “They are safe,” Andrew finally responded, “Last night you freaked out and told them to go into the room behind you, you fell asleep guarding the door. Wouldn’t let anyone in. You took a swing at Aaron when he tried. Actually hit Nicky when he stepped over you to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and you tried to bite me when I pulled you off of him.”

“Sorry... “ Neil said furrowing his eyebrows, “I don’t remember any of that.”

Andrew passed Neil a sealed water bottle and a plate of strawberries. And Neil raised his eyebrows.

“Kevin texted me and said you like fruit, and I figured you wouldn’t drink anything we offered you unless it was sealed,” Andrew responded.

Neil furrowed his eyebrows, and the events of the night prior came rushing back. They were fractured, and broken. But Neil remembered enough.

“Did those guys from the ally- “

“They didn’t even get your pants unzipped,” Andrew responded, “But they were making out with you when I found you. One had his hand wrapped tightly around your neck.”

Neil brought a hand up to his neck, and winced when even through the fabric the bruise stung.

“I didn’t let anyone touch you,” Andrew said, “So we still need to get a look at it.”

“Why are you acting like this?” Neil asked quietly.

“I don’t believe in regret,” Andrew said, staring at the wall, his arms were crossed over his chest, “But I can admit when I misjudged and was wrong. This will never happen again, I promise.”

Neil let out a shaky exhale of breath. A different him would have been pissed, livid to have been drugged like he was last night. Maybe a him who never ended up with the Ravens. A him who got away with his mother and was free. But this him, didn’t care. It was sad, it was terrifying. But it was normal. And at least this morning he only woke up with a sore neck, and not blood pooling where he was sitting.

“I can guard the door while you shower if it makes you feel better,” Andrew said dryly, “But I’m hoping that you’re sober enough to know that Jean and Kevin are under no threat here.”

Neil nodded, Andrew was right. In his sober state he knew that Kevin and Jean were completely safe.

Neil stood up, or at least tried. He got one leg under him before it gave out and his face planted onto the floor. He tried to push himself up with his arms, but they were no better. A dry laugh exited his lips, and finally he swallowed his pride.

“I need help,” Neil muttered weakly.

Neil heard Andrew shift, and he stiffened out of instinct.

“Yes or no?”

The question caught Neil off guard.

“What?” Neil asked. He fell onto his back so that he was looking up at Andrew.

“Yes or- “

“I heard you,” Neil said, “I just don’t understand.”

Andrew’s jaw clenched and Neil flinched, preparing for the hit.

“I’m asking if I can touch you to help you up,” Andrew said simply.

“Why are you asking?”

“Because I need your consent.”

“Would it matter either way?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“It’s not stupid when you’ve lived the life I have,” Neil said.

Andrew is silent for a moment, “From here on out, it matters. If you say no, it means no.”

Neil stares at Andrew’s hand, and he finds himself believing him.

“Yes or no?” Andrew asked again.

Neil lifted his arm towards Andrew, “Yes,” Neil said.

Andrew hoisted Neil off the ground and put Neil’s arm around his shoulders, “Don’t touch me anywhere else.” Andrew said.

Neil nodded, though his head already felt light, his entire body going through flashes of hot and cold.

“I’m going to put my arm around your waist for support,” Andrew said, “Tell me if you want me to stop.”

“Okay,” Neil responded. But when the arm touched his waist he stiffened. “Too low,” he choked out, your hand is too low.”

Andrew’s hand instantly went higher and Neil relaxed.

“Thank you,” Neil muttered.

“Don’t thank me for human decency.”

“Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I can and will drop you Wesninski,” Andrew said. But Andrew continued to support Neil all the way to the bathroom.

Once there, Andrew set Neil down on the toilet.

“What clothes do you want to wear?” Andrew asked.

“Long sleeves and sweatpants,” Neil responds, he lets his head fall back against the wall when Andrew leaves. Taking a moment to catch his breath.

Neil takes a shower. Normally he was quick, but this morning he found himself slumping against the wall in exhaustion. His neck was sore and his arms hurt as well. To put it simply he felt like trash.

Neil found a set of clothes on the sink when he got out of the shower. They were soft, and the hoodie he threw on smelled nice. So he allowed himself to sink to the floor and be comforted by the soft fabric.

A knock on the door startled Neil, but he managed to calm himself enough to mumble, "Come in."

Andrew stepped back in and sank down the wall across from Neil. Andrew's hands shook slightly, and Neil noticed that the grin that came with his medication was still missing.

"You should take your pills," Neil said, "You're not looking so hot."

Andrew just stared at Neil, "I'll take them in the car. I needed to speak with you first."

Neil doesn't respond but he stares at Andrew expectantly.

"I want to play a game of truths," Andrew says, "The only rule is that you have to tell the truth and I have to tell the truth."

"Do I have to answer every question?" Neil asked.

"No."

Neil stared, "Can you promise me something first?"

Andrew looked at Neil.

"Promise me that, what you did last night," Neil says, swallowing, "You did it because you were protecting Kevin and Jean."

Andrew's gaze never wavers, "I promise."

Neil relaxes, "Okay."

"I want to know why you protect them," Andrew says, "I do it because I have a deal with them. Why do you do it?"

Neil shrugs, "My father is a piece of shit who left me at the nest to rot when I was six. My mother was killed in front of me by said father. Riko promised to protect me and then betrayed me. Kevin and Jean are my brothers. They've been there to patch me up after every beating."

Neil's breath shudders.

"I don't care what happens to me," Neil says, "I'm nothing. I don't matter. I'm dirty and used and broken. But Kevin and Jean mean everything to me. I would die so that they could be happy."

It's silent and when Neil looks up Andrew is watching him.

"Why did you protect Nicky?" Neil asks, "From what I understand you don't have a deal with him."

Andrew considers Neil's question, "He was taking care of me," Andrew said, "He took Aaron and I in when he didn't have to."

Neil nods. Already knowing about Nicky's history.

"What proof can you give me that you aren't a threat to Kevin and Jean?" Andrew asks, "You said you won't tell me how you got out, but I need something that proves that how you got out won't affect them."

Neil takes a sharp inhalation of breath. His mind flitting to all the possible ways he could prove to Andrew he wasn't a threat.

Finally he settles on one.

"Give me your hand," Neil says quietly, holding out his own, "And promise you'll keep your eyes on my face."

Andrew nods and Neil rolls up his sleeve and places Andrew's fingers on his forearm. Neil's eye's never leave Andrew's face as he guides Andrew's hand along the length of his long vertical scars. And true to his word, Andrew keeps his eyes locked onto Neil's. Neil guides Andrew's other hand to his other arm, and he let's go, allowing Andrew to trace the lines of his own accord. Trusting Andrew to stop if Neil needed him to.

Neil didn't know how after one night he could trust Andrew like this, but at the same time. Andrew had been the first and only person to ask 'yes or no?' in Neil's entire life.

"Two years ago I couldn't take it anymore," Neil says his eyes locked with Andrew. "Riko had drugged me and made me beg. And I had given in and begged him. I don't know why that's what finally broke me of all things but it was. I was taken to the hospital, and while I was gone Jean and Kevin paid the price. I made a promise to myself when I got back that I would get them out of there. That I would make sure they were safe. I made them that same promise. And I am not about to break that promise just because Riko decided to throw a tantrum. Riko can do what he wants to me. I don't care anymore. But I won't let him hurt Jean and Kevin. They are the only thing keeping me alive."

Andrew's eyes never strayed from Neil's face, and the only reaction he showed in response was a tightened grip on Neil's arm that quickly relaxed. The featherlight touch on Neil's scars was almost soothing in a way, but Neil had had enough touching for the day.

He pulled his arms away and rolled the sleeves of the hoodie back down. Andrew obediently dropped his hands and stood up. Together they exited the bathroom, and watched the rest of the group get ready for the day.

When they got back to the tower Wymack was waiting. His gaze was furious and set on Andrew.

But when he saw Neil's neck, and the bruise around it. Wymack's temper flared.

Wymack stepped towards Andrew and Neil felt a surge of protectiveness swell inside him. Never would he have done what he did for anyone but Kevin and Jean, but Neil stood in front of Wymack hands up and tense.

"It wasn't him," Neil said nervously, "Some guy at the bar drugged me and dragged me outside, but Andrew got him off me before anything bad happened. They didn't do anything to me but talk."

Wymack's gaze was that of surprise, and from the sharp inhalation of breath behind him, he knew at least a few of the group were wearing a similar expression.

Wymack relaxed and sighed, running a hand through his hair, "Next time would one of you answer your phones?"

"If I feel like it," Andrew responds. His smile is back. His meds coursing through his system.

Neil walked away before he could hear Coach's response. His body was sore, and he was exhausted. He heard Wymack call out to him, but it sounded like one of the group told him to lay off or something close.

Neil fell into bed, ignoring the looks the upperclassmen sent him. But he heard their voices drift through the door only twenty minutes later.

"What did Andrew say?"

"He said to fuck off."

“Really!? Are we supposed to be trusting him or not.”

“Andrew let him stay so obviously- “

“Or maybe Andrew is slowly plotting his death.”

“I think we should just- “

“I still don’t trust him.”

“Maybe we should at least get to know him.”

“He threw a knife at Seth, excuse me if I don’t really want to be in the same room as him.”

“For now just keep an eye on him.”

“Guys should someone make sure he’s okay, I mean did you see the bruise- “

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

Neil didn’t feel fine. Despite the understanding he and Andrew had come to that morning, he felt raw and exposed. He felt lonely and cornered.

But he was grateful, because despite not having been asked. Andrew kept his secrets.

Chapter 9

Andrew's group ignored Neil for the most part after their trip to Columbia. Kevin and Jean though were allowed around him now. So despite the fact that Aaron, Nicky, and Andrew were ignoring his presence. Neil still ended up in their dorm room more often than not, going over plays and conversing with Jean and Kevin.

The two of them were almost enough to make Neil forget about how the other foxes hated him. But at the end of the night, Neil still retired to a dorm room with Seth and Matt.

Matt got better after Columbia. He didn't seem as jumpy around Neil, and he tried to start even more conversations. Matt was the one who helped Neil set up his classes.

"Math? Really?" Matt asked shocked, as Neil put all of his classes as math classes, and chose a math major. "You don't strike me as a math guy."

"It's better than being a history guy," Neil said it loudly, and Kevin, who had chosen to lounge in Neil's room that day, threw his bottle of water at Neil's head.

"Fuck you," Kevin said eloquently. "History is great. Your numbers are a fucking eyesore."

"You're just mad because you struggle with times tables," Neil snarled.

This time a pillow flew across the room. And Neil easily ducked under it.

Matt laughed as he watched the two of them bicker.

"I'm starting to see the whole 'brother's thing now," Matt said with a smile.

"Eat shit," Kevin spat at Neil.

Neil made a mocking gasp, "I didn't know you were on the menu."

It took a disappointing minute for Kevin to get it, but when he did he was lunging at Neil.

Neil grinned as he sprinted away. He made it out to the hallway before Kevin leapt tackling Neil to the ground. Kevin tried to pin Neil's hands to the ground but Neil got free every time. Kevin was bigger and stronger. But Kevin was also more ticklish.

Neil began poking at Kevin's ribs until Kevin fell over with an unmanly screech and clutching at his sides. Finally Neil was on top and had Kevin pinned.

"Got you Day!" Neil sing-songed.

Kevin glared, "Fuck you Wesninski!"

Neil was going to respond, but then rough hands were yanking Neil off of Kevin and dragging him.

Neil's breath caught in his throat, and he struggled to breathe as he was dragged down the hall. He fought back clawing and kicking.

Someone knocked on a door. There were words exchanged between people.

Neil fought harder.

"Don't touch me," He wheezed, "Let me go. Let me go."

It was Evermore. It wasn't Evermore. It was Evermore.

The hallway was flickering between the two places.

Finally he was dumped on the ground and he was pulled into a room.

His mind screamed and he tried to run.

"Stop it." A voice said, "You aren't at Evermore."

But he was because someone had grabbed him. Someone had-

"He didn't attack me." Kevin. That sounded like Kevin." We were just messing around. He was tickling me for fucksake."

Neil scrambled. His back was too open; he needed a wall.

"The wall," He heard his own voice say. He scrambled trying to look around.

"I'll help you find the wall, yes or no?"

Neil's mind screeched to a halt.

"Yes or no?"

"Andrew?" Neil breathed. Reality began to come back to him, and Neil grasped it with shaking hands.

"Yes," Andrew said. Andrew wasn't smiling at the moment. And Neil remembered that it was usually about this time that Andrew came off his meds to wind down for the night.

Jean stood in the doorway. Staring in concern at Neil.

"I was messing with Kevin," Neil says. His brows furrowed and he searched the sequence of events. "He ran after me and tackled me, I tickled him and pinned him."

"Kevin's ticklish?" Nicky's voice asked.

"Tickle me and I'll castrate you," Kevin shot back.

Neil didn't listen to the background noise though, his eyes focused on the piercing Hazel ones that grounded him and held his gaze.

"Someone grabbed me," Neil clutched his head, after that the memory was foggy.

"Seth's an asshole. He's had it out for you since you threw a knife at him. And throwing you to me after you 'attacked Kevin' was probably his form of payback." Andrew said. "Dumbass didn't even realize you were panicking."

Neil breathed. "Don't tell him I was. I don't want- "

Neil cut himself off. He didn't want Seth to know Neil had a weakness to being grabbed. It was giving too much to someone who had something against him.

"He's such a jackass," Nicky muttered.

"Don't tell him," Neil responded.

"The rest of the foxes think we were fighting," Kevin says. "They already don't trust you. If we don't tell them- "

"I won't." Andrew responded to Neil.

Andrew's eyes held nothing but perfect understanding. It was comforting and jarring all at the same time.

Andrew got up and offered Neil his hand. Neil took it and allowed himself to be pulled up and guided over to the tables. Nicky had managed to pull Kevin and Jean into a conversation about something Neil didn't have the willpower to care about, so Andrew and Neil sat alone in the kitchen area.

Andrew pulled a chocolate bar out of the cupboard and set it in front of Neil.

Neil's mouth twisted into a grimace and he shook his head.

Andrew set the chocolate aside and then turned to Neil.

"Our game," Andrew said, "Ask me a question."

Neil thought for a moment before responding, "Why don't you try during practices?" Neil asked.

Andrew stared at Neil, his eyebrows raised. As if to judge Neil's use of a question.

"I don't see the point. I don't enjoy the game. I get nothing out of it." Andrew responded.

Neil's brow furrowed. "Then why play?"

"That's two questions," Andrew responded.

"Then I'll just owe you an extra one."

"It beats waiting to die," Andrew responds, "At least by a small amount."

Neil doesn't know how to respond to that, so he doesn't. Andrew takes Neil's silence as his cue and chooses to ask his question.

"Why do you dislike ice cream and chocolate?" Andrew asks. "You said ice cream makes you sick and it didn't sound like a lie. But I've seen you drink milk with no problem at all. You aren't lactose-intolerant."

Neil chews his bottom lip, "Riko always expected something in return for giving me a dessert."

"Something?"

"My mouth," Neil gritted out. His mouth suddenly tasted like the bitterness that came after Riko used his mouth.

Andrew flicked his gaze to Neil and then pulled something out of his pocket.

Andrew placed a stick of gum into Neil's hand and Neil stared at it for a moment before sticking it in his mouth and allowing the minty flavor to assault his senses.

"People won't ask for that here," Andrew pointed out. Remember no means no here.

Neil shrugged, "It doesn't matter. None of it tastes like it should anymore. It all tastes... like *them*."

Andrew stares at Neil a moment.

"You have issues," Andrew said, standing up and walking away.

"Tell me something I don't know," Neil muttered to himself tiredly.

Sleeping only got more difficult after that day. The foxes seemed even more hesitant to have Neil around. And Neil eventually gave up on trying with them entirely.

Allison snapped at him easily. Renee seemed to trust him a tiny bit more, but none of the upperclassmen trusted Neil with Renee. Matt was the only other one who figured out the truth of what happened, and Neil had begged him to stay quiet, to not give away Neil's weakness. And Dan didn't trust Neil with Matt. Seth was like a predator circling his prey. His taunts and jeers got worse and worse.

Neil didn't sleep. He forgot to eat in his attempt to just avoid the team entirely. His mind was on the brink of panic and breaking. He just wanted to sleep. And some moments he caught himself wondering about an external sleep. His arms itched with need. And his head spun.

He threw his body into practice and practice alone.

Neil climbed out of bed after Matt and Seth fell asleep, panic tight in his chest.

He let his feet carry him to the court, and he sat on the floor.

Silver caught his eye and he realized he pulled out his switchblade.

Neil's hand shook. He was tired. He felt alone. He wasn't thinking straight and there were shadows flitting in every corner.

He was pressing the knife to his skin without processing it. But he startled when the lights flicked on.

Wymack stared at Neil, his eyes wide and his expression a sick parody of the moment Neil climbed through his office window for the first time.

They blinked at each other, and in seconds Wymack was across the room and ripping the knife from Neil's grip.

"Give me the others," Wymack said gruffly.

Neil pulled out his knives and put them all into Wymack's hand.

"I'll be having Jean and Kevin check to make sure that's all of them," Wymack said.

Neil stayed silent. His body was tense. He was tired. He needed sleep.

Wymack crouched down in front of Neil. "Do you want to sleep on my couch for the night?"

Neil's head snapped up. His eyes widened in shock.

Wymack shook his head, " You look like you haven't slept in years kid," Wymack supplied, " Come crash on my couch if you're having trouble sleeping with the others."

Neil felt a rush of gratitude flow through him. And he suddenly felt awful for every moment he had thought badly of Wymack in the past.

Wymack seemed to recognize it, and he led Neil to his office, where Wymack picked up a stack of files. And then Wymack drove Neil to his apartment. Neil collapsed onto the couch and fell asleep within minutes.

Chapter 10

The day before classes started, practice was a mess. All the foxes had to go see Betsy Dobson. The thought sent shivers down Neil's spine.

Neil had been ordered by his highschool and the state to get professional help after his excessive tendency to self harm was discovered soon after his suicide attempt. As with everything else that had to do with the nest, it hadn't been pleasant. The therapist they had gotten Neil, hadn't cared if Neil bled.

But results were results in the Master's eyes. Neil had stopped self-harming for the simple fact of not wanting to end up back in that office again.

It was almost ironic that self-harm was yet again the reason that Wymack was unrelenting about Neil going.

"I'm fine coach," Neil said, "It was just a slip up."

"Kid you bringing a knife to your arm isn't the only fucking problem, it's the fact that you felt you needed to." Wymack responded.

"I'm all better now though," Neil said. It felt like a lie. It probably was, Neil wasn't sure.

"Yes you certainly look like the poster boy for mental health," Wymack stated. "The first few hours of meeting you I had you on suicide watch. This has been a long time coming. You're going whether you like it or not. And it's going to be a regular thing. Consider it court ordered."

Neil grimaced at that.

But he didn't grimace quite as hard as when he heard that he would be paired with Renee for their meeting with Dobson.

Andrew handed his keys off to Renee without hesitation when he and Nicky got back. Nicky seemed to grimace at that, but the rest of the foxes were staring at Neil. Their gazes were full of distrust.

Neil wondered what they would say if he told them Renee could probably easily take him out in a fight.

Renee had been one that Riko researched thoroughly. Renee with a past that was dark and dangerous. She posed a threat to Riko, a big one.

And Neil didn't trust her kind words towards him. She had gotten nicer after Andrew took Neil to Columbia, and she no longer showed the same amount of distrust. But she still regarded Neil warily. And Neil was wary of putting his back to her.

Neil understood why Renee and Andrew got along. Despite her kind hearted exterior, Renee had been through foster care much like Andrew. She had rolled with the wrong crowd. And Neil is pretty sure she even killed some people.

Neil was sure that her dark past was the only reason Andrew tolerated her presence. And the rest of the foxes seemed to think the two Goalies would end up dating, despite that being against what many wanted.

Neil had overheard them all discussing it at one point. Though he'd eventually found the conversation boring and left.

Once they were in the car Neil fidgeted nervously. The girl beside him didn't try to speak, and so Neil settled for fidgeting with the edges of his sleeve and scratching at his arm. Though he tried to stop himself.

His arm itched from his newest cuts, and Neil's stomach twisted when having to think about telling anybody about them.

The silence in the car was grating so Neil reached an arm out to turn up the volume of the radio.

Renee's hand shot up and Neil flinched back, but not fast enough to avoid her grip.

Neil's breathing picked up, but he was shocked when Renee turned his arm over. He cursed himself, his sleeve had ridden up while he reached for the dials, and Renee had seen.

They were stopped and a stop light. And Neil watched Renee's gaze turn saddened.

"Oh," she stated simply. She released Neil's arm, much to his surprise.

He expected her to say something, tell him how weak his was. We waited for her to tell him comforting bullshit that he'd never believe. But Renee said nothing. Her gaze simply returned to the road.

"Don't tell anyone," Neil said quietly.

Renee is silent for a moment, "Does coach know?"

"It's the whole reason I'll be going to these weekly," Neil mutters.

"Then I won't," Renee responds.

More silence settles between the two of them and then Renee speaks again.

"I'm sure the team will come around by the way," Renee says.

"Edgar Allan came around too," Neil says bitterly, "And inside, and on."

The words exited his lips before he could stop them. Kevin always had said Neil had a big mouth and the tendency for smartass remarks. And Neil attitude aged like cheese, getting sharper overtime.

Renee doesn't respond, and Neil is grateful for that. If he didn't learn to keep his mouth shut then the whole team would know how weak he was soon.

He shook the thought away

Renee didn't try to speak to Neil again, and never before had Neil been *happy* to reach a shrink's office. But here he was.

Renee went first, and Neil's foot tapped nervously on the ground. His entire body fidgeting. He scratched at his arm, trying desperately to calm himself.

When Renee came back, she was being followed by a woman with narrow-rimmed glasses and a kind face.

Neil's body went rigid as she turned to him.

"You must be Neil!" Betsy turned to Neil and stuck out her hand, and Neil stared at it. His hands stayed rigid at his sides. Neil had been used by men and women in the nest. Gender didn't affect Neil's aversion to touch. And gender didn't make anyone any less of a threat.

Betsy seemed to take the hint and led Neil back to the office.

Neil stopped in the doorway as Betsy continued inside. The whole room reeked of baked cookies, and it made Neil's stomach churn. He could feel a bitter taste settle in his mouth, and he suddenly had the urge to brush his teeth until his gums bled.

Betsy sat in her chair and made eye contact with him. But she didn't push him to come inside.

So instead of going into the office. Neil put his back against the wall opposite the door in the hall and sat down on the floor.

"Wymack said you'll need to meet with me regularly, but he didn't tell me why," Betsy says, "Could you?"

Neil tried to speak but the air from the office *tasted* like cookies, and Neil clenched his mouth shut. His body trembling.

The smell and taste were an assault on his senses like none other. And he could almost feel the-

Neil's thoughts were cut off by the sound of a door clicking shut. Betsy stood outside her office and slid down on the floor so that they both sat against opposite of each other.

The smell and the taste were cut off all at once, and Neil felt his heart rate slow.

Betsy watched his face for a moment, and Neil waited to be punished for having such a reaction. He bows his head and waits, trembling.

"Do you not like the office?" Betsy asks.

Neil didn't know if he liked it or not, he hadn't even been able to step inside.

"I don't like desserts," Neil responded.

It sounded stupid. His fingers fisted in the fabric of his shorts. He sounded weak, having such a reaction to something as stupid as the smell of cookies. Neil had smelled desserts before and had no problems. So he didn't understand.

His hands went up and pulled at his hair, trying to ground himself to the present time.

He looked up, expecting judgment, but Betsy just had a look of understanding and kindness. Neil felt himself relaxing even though he didn't mean to. The kindness in Betsy's eyes is the kind he'd been yearning for for the weeks that he'd been with the foxes. No it'd been what he yearned for since the moment that Jean left the nest. He was starved for it.

Betsy hummed, "Do you have your own vehicle?" Betsy asked.

Neil shook his head.

"How about we plan for Wednesdays after Andrew's session then," Betsy smiled. "You can catch a ride with him that way."

"I'll have to check with Andrew first," Neil said quietly.

It felt wrong to agree without asking Andrew, especially after Andrew had been so respectful of Neil's boundaries.

The quiet "Yes or no?" Echoed in Neil's thoughts whenever he felt like the foxes were being too much. And it was on replay everytime someone mentioned Andrew being a monster. Neil had seen monsters, plenty of them. They haunted his dreams nightly, and none of them had the faces of Andrew. None of them asked "Yes or no?".

Betsy hummed, "I have his phone number, I can ask him now if that's alright? I'd like to get you scheduled in."

Neil nodded, surprised that Betsy had Andrew's phone number at all. Andrew didn't seem like the type to get along with shrinks.

"Hi Andrew," Betsy smiled, "No nothing is wrong. I actually have something to ask you."

There is a moment of silence.

"Neil here is going to start having weekly sessions as well," Betsy says, "And I was wondering if you'd be willing to have his line up with yours so that you can ride together. Nicky can drop you both off and pick you both back up."

Neil can hear talking from the other end.

"He's actually the one who wanted to make sure it was okay with you first. He already seems to be okay with the option." Betsy says in response.

There is silence. Neil can't even hear Andrew on the other line.

Neil holds out his hand and Betsy smiles and pushes the phone into his waiting palm.

"Yes or No?" Neil asks parroting the question back to Andrew.

"Asking for my permission?" A mocking gasp sounds from the other side of the phone.

"It only seems fair."

"I'm a fox." Andrew responds, "I don't get 'fair'."

"With me, you do."

"Getting stuck with you doesn't seem fair," Andrew responds. There's a teasing tone to his voice, but it's neither warm nor cold.

"Then say no if you don't want to," Neil responds. "I'll respect it."

More silence echos over the phone, "I really hate you," Andrew says suddenly.

"Join the club."

"Wow!" There is a maniacal laugh, "You really do need therapy. Did you attach your self esteem to a rock and sink it to the bottom of the ocean?"

"Along with my fraying mental state."

Another laugh sounds, "Tell Betsy it's a yes, but that there is no promises you will arrive alive."

"There are hardly any promises I'd arrive alive anyways," Neil mutters.

"You are a walking tragedy, Wesninski."

"I know."

Neil hangs up the phone and passes it back to Betsy.

"He says it's fine," Neil responds.

Betsy smiles, "I think that'll be it for today then. I try to keep my sessions relaxed. But yours didn't start great today, so I'll give you a break."

Neil nods and stands up, ignoring the hand that Betsy offered to him.

Neil walks out and joins Renee, and the two head back to the court.

When practice ended, Neil tried to continue with his two hours after practice, to wait until everyone was gone. But Wymack poked his head out.

"I swear to Christ Wesninski!" Wymack shouted, "Kill yourself on someone else's time. Get your ass in here so that I can start this damn team meeting."

Neil hurried himself, embarrassed by the fact that he had made everyone wait.

The showers were luckily empty by the time he got there, and he showered and changed as fast as he could.

He barely entered the room before Wymack began to speak.

"Now that our resident ExyholiC is here," Wymack ground out. "Classes start tommorow which means our practice time changes too. I know all your schedules and I know all of you can be here on time. If one of you is late you'd better have a reason and the reason better be school or dying. The press will be crawling all over the school. Don't talk to them, any of you."

Wymack points at Neil, "Especially you. Your name and face aren't going to be released until the day of our first game. The ERC knows that you're a former raven, but that's it. And the press seemed to have picked up on that fact and have been running it. Which brings me to my next point. Kathy Ferdinand wants to interview Jean, Kevin, and our 'mystery Raven' on Saturday."

Neil stares. He'd met Kathy once or twice when he accompanied Riko, Kevin, and Jean to their interviews on her show. She was annoying, and he'd constantly have to keep from biting his tongue and snapping at her.

Jean snorted out a laugh at Neil's disgusted face.

"You owe me 20 dollars Kevin," Jean said laughing, "I told you that'd be the face he made."

Kevin sighed and forked over the money. And Wymack raised an eyebrow.

"Problem?"

"She is a pain in the ass," Neil said.

Wymack sighs, "Can you at least promise not to go on stage and cause a scene."

"I'd be lying," Neil responded.

Wymack covers his face with his hand.

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" Neil asked.

"If Riko gets the first word about why you left it could be bad," Kevin responded, "It's better if you speak out first."

The reasoning was solid. Even more solid when he remembered the deal he'd made with Ichirou to prove himself as a worthy investment.

Neil nodded.

"Hold on. Hold on." Allison holds up a hand, "I'm sorry but are we just going to skip over the fact that Kathy asked you one her show?"

It wasn't surprising to any of the ex-ravens. All of them had been trained how to act in front of the press from a young age. And Neil had been trained on how to cover up bruises and look pretty for the cameras. But for the foxes, a popular interview host asking for one of their own to be on the show, was probably new.

"I am going to have to wake up early and watch this?" Dan said excitedly. "Kevin's going to have to be decent."

"For once." Neil added under his breath.

He'd misjudged his distance from Kevin, because Kevin shot his leg out and kicked Neil in the chest.

Neil wheezed and coughed a few times, "Fuck you!" Neil strained out.

Wymack rubbed his temples again, "I have a feeling this is going to be a disaster."

"That's what we'd say everytime 'Nathaniel' and 'media' were mentioned in the same sentence," Kevin said.

Neil made to smack him. But he paused when he remembered how all the foxes saw him as suspicious. His hand dropped back to his lap and Neil averted his eyes to the ground.

Even after Columbia Neil couldn't truly have Jean and Kevin back.

Wymack finally shot in, "I have enough tickets for everyone on the team," Wymack says, "So if any of you would like to go, then you can. Be aware it will be an early morning though, and on a day right after a game. Is that all... alright. Dismissed."

The foxes cleared out and headed back to bed.

After getting caught by Wymack in the locker room, Neil had begun sleeping some nights at Wymack's apartment. Matt had tried to talk to Neil about the issue, but Dan had stepped in as usual, pulling Matt away.

Neil woke up on the day of classes and ran to the campus from Wymack's apartment.

The day felt tedious more than long. Most his classes were just handing out syllabi and going over basic, so there wasn't anything extremely difficult. But the day was boring and Neil found himself wishing he could be anywhere but in the stuffy classrooms.

When his last class finished, he wove through countless students, back to the tower and power walked to his dorm and then over to his bed.

"Rough first day?" Matt asked, startling Neil out of his thoughts.

"Boring one," Neil responded.

"Wish I could say it gets better... but..."

Neil huffed out a laugh. He was on the top bunk, so Matt had to look up to stare at him.

"Hey," Matt said, "I won't let Seth hurt you in your sleep or anything like that. I don't think the guy would stoop that low. But he'd have to get past me to get to you. And I wouldn't let that happen."

The words shouldn't have given Neil as much relief as they did. But Neil found himself hiding his face inside his pillow so Matt didn't see his vulnerable expression.

"Thank you," Neil finally choked out quietly.

There was no response. There didn't need to be. So Neil let himself be lulled to sleep by Matt's pencil scratching out equations on his paper.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I woke up at 6am to write this one for you guys. Your comments have encouraged me. Enjoy 2k words of Neil being a shithead. And also look forward to other chapters tonight. Possibly four. Who knows really. Kathy's show is completely planned out in my head and so is the fallout.

You guys are amazing. I hope I wrote the game alright. I try not to copy anything word for word from the book cause I want this fic to be a new experience, but it's super hard to write the games I've found. So I hope you all enjoy it anyways.

Come Friday, campus was a wild house. Everyone was decked out in orange and white. School logos were everywhere. Everyone was hyped up for the game against Breckenridge.

Neil hadn't realized how important the anonymity he'd had before was, until he stepped onto campus in his jersey.

That morning his face became known as the newest Edgar Allan raven to join the foxes. And everyone was waiting to swarm him. Neil kept his head down as best he could. Using his hand to cover his tattoo at some points. But it did little good.

Classmates grabbed at his shoulders and spoke with him. People tried to engage in small talk across the board. And Neil was just trying hard to get from class to class.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief when Matt came along and broke up the latest swarm of people. And he didn't even flinch when Matt threw his arm around him to pull him from the crowd. Neil would have started praying if Matt hadn't come, and Neil is pretty sure he pissed God off with his attitude a long time ago.

"Are you nervous?" Matt asked. Matt waved at a group of cheerleaders as they passed, ever the friendly one of the two of them.

"About the game or about all these people?"

"Both?" But it was phrased as more questioning than as a statement.

"I hate the crowds but I'm excited to play," Neil said.

Matt huffed out a laugh, "I'd expect nothing less from you!"

Neil frowns.

Matt notices and continues, "Dude you practice the most out of everyone. You practice more than Kevin and Jean. Even Kevin has thought about yanking you off the court and forcing you to sleep."

Neil's eyebrows furrow. "I get less practice here than I did at Edgar Allan."

Matt pauses, "Did you ever sleep?" Matt asked incredulously.

Neil frowned, "I got three hours every night."

It was a lie. Neil hardly slept one hour a night in the nest. But four hours is what he was left alone for most nights, so at least that was some form of rest.

Eventually Matt and Neil split ways, and Neil survived for a bit longer before he was caught again. Girls swarmed Neil and he pushed through, hating the fact that he was being touched.

"Sorry girls," Renee's voice cut through the excited questions about Riko and Kevin," He's with me."

Renee did something similar to Matt, except Renee simply hooked her arm with Neil's. It was a hold Neil could get out of easily. And Neil appreciated it. Renee led Neil away from the crowds again and acted as a ward to scare off anyone who looked like they were about to start asking questions.

By the time his last class rolled around, Neil was thoroughly exhausted. But despite Neil's intense wave of exhaustion, he couldn't sleep.

His mind was running at a million miles an hour, and his thoughts drifted to Ichirou. Technically the foxes could lose this game and still go to championships, but Neil still wanted to win. He needed to impress Ichirou if he ever wanted a chance at staying alive.

Honestly the want was built out of his spite for Riko, but if he was still alive did it matter what his motivations were?

Friday night practice was canceled in preparation for their game and the foxes were expected to be at the stadium an hour before the game started.

Neil made an error, he'd arrived too late to get dressed separately. He still got there before the foxes did. But he'd been in the middle of changing his shirt in the common when the upperclassmen entered the room. He froze with his entire upper body bared, and he heard conversation die.

He couldn't turn around. But his body started trembling. He didn't like using the showers to change because it felt too easy to be cornered in there. And with the time restraint, Neil had just changed in the common area. He'd finished his pants, but he hadn't been fast enough to get his shirt on. And his upper body was the worst.

Disgusting.

Neil bit his lip so hard it bled, and forced himself to throw on his armor and jersey. His movement seemed to stun the upperclassmen into talking because suddenly he was being talked at by a group of people who previously ignored his entire existence.

"Oh my God- "

"Who did this to you- "

"Jesus Christ- "

"Stop," Andrew's voice cut over the talking and he finally stepped into the room. The smile is still set on his face but even then Andrew understood boundaries, " Can't handle his boo-boos? Aren't you the ones who questioned my judgment on him? Come on now, you can't start showing you give a damn now when that time is long since over."

Renee and Andrew share a glance, and Renee turns to the upperclassmen and says something quietly. Whatever she said, the upperclassmen obeyed and got moving.

Neil left the locker room and stood outside it waiting for Wymack. He listened to the roar of the crowd, and felt his stomach churn in a way only Exy could manage.

Neil feels a hand on his shoulder and he gets guided back back into the lockerroom by Kevin.

Neil smiled a hungry smile as he looked at Kevin, "You'd better get at least two goals tonight Day." Neil says. The locker room silences and Neil points at Jean, " And I know you can shut down their strikers."

Kevin rolled his eyes, " I'm still using my right hand Abram, it won't be that simple."

Neil grinned at the use of his middle name, "Have you been using your right hand outside of practice?"

"Annoyingly," Andrew states, "Hey tweety-bird, next time you have homework for him. Make sure it'd not be the kind where he pours alcohol all over our dorm because he's an uncoordinated mess."

"Wait." Allison says, "You told Kevin what to do and he listened to you?"

Neil shrugged. And Kevin frowned.

"Neil made a suggestion that made sense," Kevin responded. "He doesn't order me around."

"Neil had lived in the nest since he was six," Jean said. "He's trained with college and professional players since he first picked up a racket."

There was silence. And suddenly Neil remembered that while Andrew's group knew about Neil being in the nest since he was six, The upperclassmen were just now finding out.

Based on previous overheard conversations, the upperclassmen hadn't figured Neil lived through much of the nest. And with Jean and Kevin keeping his secrets, and the cousins not speaking up about Columbia, this was a huge reality check.

They all stared at Neil with wide eyes. Dan even looked a bit guilty. Neil didn't care, he didn't blame them for being suspicious. He would have been suspicious too. But he certainly didn't want to deal with their questions tonight.

Luckily Wymack entered the room and handed out papers. Neil looked over Breckenridge's starting lineup.

Neil heard a swear from Seth as the paper was looked over.

"Gorilla is back," Seth said annoyed.

Kevin's face was scrunched up in irritation as well. And Neil mentally went over the player in his head.

"Gorilla" Hawking, was a backliner with a fondness for body checks. And not to mention he dwarfed Neil with his size.

"Don't worry," Matt said, taking Neil's silence as concern. "He'll be too busy taking Kevin and Seth out to worry much about you.

The concern made Neil snort.

"You don't need to worry about Neil," Jean said, "I am more concerned about Hawking if he goes after Neil."

The foxes shoot Jean a look, but Wymack shuffles the foxes out before they can question what that means.

"Try not to piss off the defensive linemen today," Jean says.

"Yeah no, that would be no fun. I am pissing them off as soon as the door opens." Neil responds.

Jean sighs exasperatedly.

The foxes warm up, their small sized team dwarfed by the size of the jackals.

Neil sat on the side-lines alongside Aaron, Nicky, Alison, and Renee.

The whistle blew and the game started.

It soon became clear that despite the foxes constant fighting and arguments, once they had a common enemy they all banded together.

They were by no means a well-oiled machine. But they communicated and talked. They had a flow. Potential.

Seth and Kevin even managed to keep it together for a short time.

"My money's on them fighting in the first 15 minutes," Nicky said smiling.

And even Neil knew not to take that bet.

Sure enough Kevin and Seth began to battle it out on the court, and Dan had to break them up.

The foxes managed to hold the defensive line only for a bit longer. But eventually a goal was shot and Andrew couldn't block it there were too many Jackals crowding the goal.

Neil shouted, "Kevin I said two not zero!"

There was no indication that Kevin heard him over the roar of the crowd, but eventually Kevin turned in a small circle to face back towards Neil. And he stuck his middle finger up high for Neil to see.

Neil grinned broadly.

Gorilla was a monster on the backline though. Whoever had decided on making the man had taken brain functionality and turned it into pure muscle and athletic capability.

Seth was struggling. Not that Kevin was faring much better with his mark. A fight had already broken out between Kevin's mark and himself.

His legs fidgeted underneath him. His knees bounced. And Wymack stared at him. His gaze was calculating.

Neil didn't have to wait much longer to play though. Seth was body checked and fell to ground. After a few moments Seth signaled for a sub.

Neil didn't even have to be asked. He was up and at the door before Wymack even said his name.

"Jesus," He heard Wymack mumble, "It's like someone lit his fucking ass on fire."

Neil ran over to Kevin and cracked sticks with him.

"Let's go Kevin!" Neil said with a smile.

Leverette was the name of Kevin's previous mark, she was annoying and Neil did his best to ignore her.

"You another raven reject like Kevin?" Leverette scorned. Neil ignored her. It was pissing her off so technically he was not listening to her and annoying her at the same time. And it made him smile.

"The great Kevin Day," Leverette taunted. "Reduced to a cripple."

Neil suddenly couldn't ignore her anymore. He took a threatening step towards Leverette but halted when a loud crack of a racket came from Andrew's area. Neil paused and glanced back at Andrew, who resumed his position in goal and twirled his racket lazily.

Neil took the hint.

Neil heard the bounce of an Exy ball on the court floor.

"Hey Roadrunner!" Andrew called.

And Neil already knew. He got set into position, and he was off before he even heard Andrew's racket crack against the ball.

The ball bounced off the far wall and Neil leaped to catch it. Leverette was still lagging behind, unable to keep up with Neil at full strength and speed. Neil took his ten steps before tossing the ball to Kevin.

Kevin only made it two steps before he had to pass it back up the court. His racket was smashed right out of his hands by Gorilla in retaliation.

Kevin gave an angry shake to his hands and picked up his racket again.

They managed to get the ball back down the court again and Kevin threw the ball into the goal. It lit up red. Kevin gave Neil a wide smile and Neil flashed Kevin a thumbs up.

The two of them high fived. The score was 2-1 Jackals favor.

But Gorilla's tactics changed. And suddenly every time Kevin caught the ball, the racket was smashed out of Kevin's hands.

After the second time, Neil had had enough.

"Let him pick it up next time," Neil shouted in irritated French.

Jean sent Neil a look from down the court. And Kevin stared for a moment before nodding.

The next time Gorilla made to smash the racket out of Kevin's hands, Kevin loosened his grip purposefully. Neil set his feet and began to sprint. Gorilla had just gotten the ball into his net, and Kevin took a full step back away from the man. Neil collided with Gorilla, a loud bang echoed as the huge backliner crashed into the wall. Neil scooped up the ball and sent it to Dan without missing a beat. Dan sent it to Kevin. And Kevin scored.

Gorilla still was crumpled onto the ground.

The stadium wasn't silent, but it was clear that people were shocked. Neil was less than half the size of the massive backliner, and hadn't even blinked when taking the man out.

But Neil was a nice guy. He offered his hand to the backliner on the floor, only to have it get batted away. Gorilla struggled to his feet, before falling again. And Neil once again stuck out his hand. This time, Gorilla angrily took it. Gorilla signaled for a sub and Neil led Gorilla over to the door. He's sure it was quite a sight to see.

Gorilla grabbed Neil by the collar and pulled him up, "When I get back out there I am going to slam you against a wall."

Neil kept the panic in that sentence at bay by reminding himself that Gorilla didn't mean it like *that* .

Neil smirked. Looked Gorilla up and down and said, "Sure you will buddy."

He jogged back to his position and continued the game.

By the time half time rolled around. The score was 7-5, Jackal's favor.

"Neil!" Dan said, "Where did you learn to check like that."

Aaron was staring wide mouthed at Neil, as was Nicky and Matt.

Neil shrugged, twirled his racket, and looked at her, "I was officially a backliner at Evermore," Neil stated easily. "I checked Riko constantly. I pissed him off though. He says he's gonna slam me against the wall when he gets back on."

"In that case you're playing the first part of the second half so you aren't playing with him." Wymack says gruffly.

Neil ignores Wymack and looks for Jean, "If he comes after me I'll do my trick."

Jean glares, "It's a dirty trick. I hate it."

"Which means he'll hate it too!" Neil says excitedly. "Perfect."

Wymack stares at Neil before turning to Jean. "Is this a legal maneuver."

"It's a Nathaniel maneuver." Kevin responds tiredly, "Which means no one can say if it's legal or not, because no one would think to do it."

"It is a practiced art form," Neil said smiling.

"It's a fucking nightmare," Jean responds.

Neil decided to do it anyway.

When the second half begins, Gorilla is on the court. Wymack swears from the side-lines as Gorilla points his racket at Neil, and Neil feels excitement rush through him.

His chance comes when he catches the ball and Gorilla runs at him full speed.

With the quickness of someone who's done this hundreds of times successfully, Neil throws the ball high into the air before running at Gorilla as well. At the last second he tosses his racket over Gorilla's head and slides in between Gorilla's legs. He caught his racket and the ball on the other side and passed it to Kevin all in one fluid motion. Kevin fires the ball, and the goal lights up red. There is a slam as Gorilla runs into the wall.

Neil can hear Wymack sputtering, and Jean's face is likely just as sour as when Neil would pull the trick on him back at Evermore.

Neil offers his hand to Gorilla again, only this time Gorilla completely ignores Neil's hand and stalks off.

The next time Gorilla tries to check him Neil passes the ball between Gorilla's open legs, and straight into Kevin's net.

The goal lights up red again. And Neil watches from where he'd leaped out of the way of the check. Gorilla is slouched and glaring against the wall. And Neil is grinning.

Gorilla shoots up and grabs Neil by the collar, slamming Neil against the wall.

"I thought you said you were gonna slam me against the wall," Neil taunted, "You're not doing a great job of it so far."

Gorilla is yanked off of Neil by the refs and Neil continues to smile.

Kevin gets subbed out as opposed to Neil. (Neil guesses it was because of Neil's endless energy.) And suddenly Seth is watching Neil with a raised eyebrow.

Neil shrugs and the two of them clack sticks.

They score one more point. And the foxes win the game.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Wow another chapter *le gasp* next up a showdown.

Neil was already up when Wymack came knocking on the door. He was dressed comfortably, already knowing there would be suits at the show.

"Did you even sleep?"

"No." Neil responded. He had gone for a long run before running the steps of the dorm. At some point he had gone to Andrew's room, and assisted in helping keep Kevin awake.

Neil was wide awake and stared at Wymack's shocked look.

"Do you live off caffeine and prayers?" Wymack asked incredulously.

"Most likely," Neil responded.

Wymack huffed before continuing with waking the rest of the foxes.

They boarded the bus, Andrew's group taking up the back, and the upperclassmen taking up the front. Dan tried to get Neil to sit with them. But Neil wasn't interested.

The night prior the foxes had tried to talk to Neil, likely about what they'd seen in the locker room before the game. But Neil had avoided them and hid. He wasn't ready to talk to them and hear what they had to say.

He'd overheard them anyways talking.

Allison and Seth still don't trust him, and that was their only reasoning for coming to the show this morning.

They arrived in Raleigh at around six. They stopped off at a fast food place and got breakfast and coffee for the team. And Wymack stood up and began to speak.

"All right- " Wymack cut himself off and glowered at the back of the bus. "Damnit Hemmick! You were supposed to wake them up miles ago!"

Nicky didn't even flinch, "I don't want to die."

Neil didn't care if he died so he raised his hand, "I've got it."

Coach gave him a suspicious look.

"I've woken Jean and Kevin up for years," Neil stated, "And I was in charge of waking up the Ravens."

Though the Ravens hadn't been as fun to wake up as Jean and Kevin. The ravens tended to wake up lustful. And Neil was like an offering on a golden plate for them.

"Yeah but Andrew wakes up like you," Nicky says grumbling.

Neil thinks for a moment, "I'll be fine." Neil responds. "That being said you guys will want to move."

Nicky and Aaron traded a look before shrugging and moving to the front of the bus. Neil starts with the easiest and pats Jean on the shoulder.

"Get up Jean," Neil says, "I'll be waking Kevin up soon."

Jean shoots up and crawls over the back of the seats to get away from the cluster fuck that was about to occur.

Neil went over to Andrew, staring at the sleeping male for a moment.

"He wakes up like you."

Neil climbs into the seat behind Andrew and knocks on the window behind Andrew's head.

"Time to get up Andrew," Neil says, "I have places to be and people to piss off."

The foxes all stare in shock as Andrew wakes up without swinging or hitting. Andrew is giving Neil a calculating look, though his eyes are bleary.

"Good morning sleepy head, just a heads up I will be waking Kevin next. You'll want to take a seat at the front of the bus so you're out of the way." Neil says without missing a beat.

Andrew stares at Neil, "I hate you." Andrew says irritated. He slides out of the seat and heads to the group at the front of the bus.

"Join the club," Neil responds, "I am the founding member."

There is no response, so Neil walks to Kevin.

"Kevin," Neil calls kicking Kevin's foot, "I can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Neil kicks Kevin's foot again. And Kevin kicks out a leg that Neil dodges.

"Fuck off," Kevin mumbles before rolling back over and going back to sleep.

Neil shrugs and looks at the foxes. "You are my witnesses," He says as he strolls to the front of the bus. He cracks his neck a few times before rolling his shoulders. "Kevin last chance!"

There is no response.

Neil shrugs, "GERONIMO!!!" Neil screams the word and then sprints. Kevin is sitting up bleary eyed at the familiar word and when he sees Neil coming he let's out an ungodly screech. Kevin dives at the same time as Neil does. Kevin over to the next seat and Neil right onto where Kevin had been sleeping. The bus shakes.

"Fuck you Wesninski!!!" Kevin is wide awake and standing.

"Good morning sleeping beauty," Neil smirks, "Did you have a nice nap?"

"Suck my dick!" Kevin ground out.

"Sure but I bite," Neil said. Neil clacked his teeth together in a show of biting hard and Kevin shivered.

"I should have known better," Wymack says tiredly.

By the time they reach the place for Kathy's show, Kathy is already waiting outside for them.

She hugs Kevin, then Jean. And she finally sees Neil. Neil almost glares, but Kevin gives him a look. A fake smile plasters on Neil's face.

"Nathaniel!" Kathy hugged Neil tight and Neil grimaced. He heard the foxes giggling.

The traitors.

"It has been so long!" Kathy responded, "And to see you all in one place again! Nathaniel for a while it was just you and Riko. I bet he was sad to see you go."

Neil held his fake smile, but he dug his nails into his arm behind his back.

"Neil," Renee says warningly, and Neil stops.

He briefly remembered Renee seeing his cuts. Apparently she was keeping an eye on him and ensuring he wasn't doing it anymore.

"I am so excited for the show today," Kathy says, "Your teammates all have front row seats of course. My Assistant will guide you boys to the dressing room."

Neil finally let's his smile fall when Kathy walks away, and he mumbles in French, *"I hope she trips in those heels."*

Jean snorts, and the assistant pays no mind to Neil's glower. The three ex-ravens are led to the changing rooms.

Neil finds a suit in his size and starts to change.

"Never thought I'd get here," Kevin says, " On an interview without Riko."

"Neither did I," Jean responds.

Neil huffs out a laugh, " I didn't expect to survive to my first semester of college so this is surprising for all of us."

Neil can feel Kevin's eyes tracing the scars on his back.

"None of it is true," Kevin says quietly.

"What?" Neil asked confused.

"None of what they put on your skin is true," Kevin responded.

Neil pauses in shrugging on his shirt.

"You said when you got here, 'At least they didn't write anything that wasn't true'," Kevin puts forth, " But none of it is."

Neil felt something catch in the back of his throat.

"You guys shouldn't lie to me," Neil said with a forced chuckle. "You're gonna give me hope or something."

"We aren't lying," Jean responds.

Neil swallows hard, stamping down on the flutter in his chest that aches to believe them. "I wish I could believe you," Neil says quietly.

The admission is soft, and Neil feels like a child again. Vulnerable and scared. Promised protection, but never without paying a fee first.

They dress the rest of the way in silence.

Jean and Kevin are sent out first onto the stage. But Neil is distracted from Kathy's intro.

There were two, two seater couches on the stage alongside Kathy's chair. It wasn't the normal set up. And the possibility that pointed to made Neil's blood turn to ice.

"Kevin! Jean!" Kathy said excitedly. "Two members of the perfect court on my stage. AND you are both the even numbers."

Neil doesn't understand why the crowd laughs. It was a stupid joke.

Kathy talks to them about the game and about the foxes.

But when Kathy asks if either of them plan to stay with the foxes, the hesitation they both have is bone chilling.

Then Neil is shoved.

"Start moving," the person says.

Neil can hear Kathy's words as he approaches the stage.

"Imagine my surprise when the newest member of your team ended up being None other than Nathaniel Wesninski!" Kathy said, " Another member of the perfect court. Can you tell us why brought him to Palmetto?"

Kathy poses the question and Kevin shrugs.

"You'll have to ask him that," Jean says.

"Great idea!" Kathy responds, " Let's get him out here! Nathaniel come on out!"

Neil walks out to the sound of loud cheers and whoops. Neil waves with both his arms and smiles a smile of a bratty child.

Back at Evermore the Master had been unable to break Neil into a poster boy media child like Riko, Kevin, and Jean. And so by the end, Coach Moriyama decided that Neil would take the persona of the bratty little brother.

It was his mistake.

"Nathaniel!" Kathy says hugging Neil.

"Call me Neil," Neil responds.

"That is much less of a mouthful." Kathy says nodding her head.

Neil looks around for a moment, as if searching for a place to sit. Then like a child, he ignored the empty couch and flopped back onto Kevin and Jean's laps.

The crowd laughed. And Neil's grin turned real when Kevin grunted in annoyance.

"Still a handful, I see," Kathy says shaking her head with a smile.

"It's my defining character trait." Neil smiles.

Kevin and Jean exhale, long and hard and the crowd laughs at their annoyance.

Kathy waits for the crowd to settle.

"Neil," Kathy says, "I'm just wondering. What on earth were you thinking leaving Edgar Allan like you did?"

"I was thinking," Neil said pretending to be thoughtful, "That I wanted to be with the best members of the perfect court."

Neil can feel Kevin and Jean tense.

"And you don't include Riko in that?" Kathy asked.

Neil sat up, he was sitting on one knee per person behind him.

"Riko couldn't do what these guys are doing," Neil shrugs, "Don't get me wrong... he's a great player. But these guys are starting from the bottom. It takes a special person to do that. I'm lucky both special people are my brothers."

Neil grinned wide and threw his arms around both Jean and Kevin.

The crowd laughed again at Neil's antics.

"And what would Riko think about your change in position?" Kathy asked.

"I don't care what he says," Neil says flipping his hand about. "I was tired of being a backliner and so I made the switch. I am having way more fun."

Kevin pinches Neil's side and the crowd laughs when Neil smacks him.

"And what about the district change?" Kathy asks.

Kevin shrugs, "I don't presume to know Coach Moriyama's intentions."

Neil interjected, "It's cause they know we are going to wipe the floor with them."

The crowd laughed again, though a few booed, and so Neil shrugged.

"Hey I see no problem with issuing a challenge to my brother at Evermore," Neil said in response to the boos, "I'll keep him on his toes."

This time the audience all laughed.

Neil smiled.

"Well how about we see how said brother takes that challenge," Kathy responds.

Neil knew the moment he was two separate couches. But still his insides twisted as Riko was announced. Neil's entire mind filled with the instinct to protect, and it was what got him standing of the couch.

"Riko!" Neil shouted.

"Nate." Riko's eyes were cold as Neil's old nickname was echoed back.

Chapter 13

Riko's glare was ice as he stepped onto the stage. But a smile pressed on his lips made it look like it wasn't a glare at all. Neil heard Kevin and Jean rise from behind him.

Riko stepped past Neil and hugged Kevin and Jean. Then he took Jean's seat next to Kevin. Neil took Kevin's seat without a second thought.

If Riko thought he was going to sit anywhere close to them, Riko thought wrong. Kevin hesitated, looking at Neil with wide eyes. But Neil just smirked.

"This is apparently the more comfortable couch," Neil said with a smile.

The audience laughed and Neil continued, "You and Jean get the other one."

The crowd laughs again, missing the way that Kevin swallows nervously. Kevin sits down next to Jean.

"Kevin if you want to sit next to me," Riko says, his voice demanding, "Nathaniel can move."

"No he can't," Neil says. He ignores all sense of self preservation and flops his legs over Riko's lap.

Riko tugs at Neil's ankle and yanks so that Neil's thighs are resting on his lap.

"Brat," Riko says. His eyes are cold, but the audience laughs. Everyone thinking that it's nothing more than brotherly banter. Everyone but the foxes.

The foxes were stock still, their mouths hanging open in expressions of horror.

Riko's hand rests on Neil's thigh. A gesture that makes Neil's skin crawl. Neil wants to scream, run, jump, hide. But Neil forces a smile.

"You call it being a brat," Neil says, "I call it being lovable."

Neil hears a whoop from Matt. But when Neil glances out to smile. Matt is rigid. Neil wonders if the foxes know how much Neil hates the position he's in right now. He wonders if any of them would even care how much his skin was begging to be clawed off. He wonders if the foxes are imagining Riko carving all of those words they saw on his skin, just like Neil was doing right now.

Based on their expressions, Neil knows they aren't imagining hugs and kittens.

"Look at me," Kathy says smiling broadly, "I have all four members of the perfect court on my stage!"

Riko pulls Neil up, even more into his lap. His smile is more real now, and it's terrifying. Neil and Riko's bodies are positioned in, towards each other. And Neil realizes why far too late. From this angle, the cameras, nor the audience or Kathy could see where Riko's hand was.

Neil grit his teeth. He could feel the hardness in Riko's pants. And he could already imagine Riko's voice afterwards.

"You started this Nate, finish it too."

Neil had to get Kevin and Jean off this fucking stage. The foxes were frozen, the only one's not were Renee, Matt, and Wymack. All three of them were restraining a struggling Andrew. Hands clamped over his mouth to keep Andrew from shouting out. Legs thrown over his lap to keep him down.

Neil searched for a way to tell Andrew that he had it handled.

“Riko’s a bit of a handful though,” Neil says, keeping himself from reacting when Riko’s cold hand brushes under the waistband of his pants, “But don’t worry I can handle him.”

Neil’s eyes go to Andrew’s. Andrew’s eyes are wide and furious, but Andrew settles into his chair.

Kathy laughs, “I thought you were the handful Neil.”

“He is,” Riko’s nails dig into Neil’s back, and Neil winces, “A big one.”

Kathy catches Neil’s wince.

“Are you doing alright there Neil?” Kathy smiles.

Neil wants to scream, wants to cry, wants to vomit. But he smiles and pats Riko’s thigh.

“I’m a bit sore from yesterday’s game,” Neil says, “And Riko here hasn’t got the comfy muscles that Kevin and Jean do.” Neil laughs, “He’s all bone.”

It was a lie of course. Riko had plenty of muscle. But Riko’s tightened grip under Neil’s shirt said the insult hit.

The foxes laugh though, and so does the audience.

“You’re the last member of the perfect court left at Edgar Allan,” Kathy says to Riko, “Should we be expecting a transfer soon?”

“To a place like Palmetto,” Riko said, “Not a chance.”

“I think the foxes are going to wipe the floor with you this year,” Neil said, “I’d watch what teams you say aren’t worth your time.”

“I heard that challenge earlier Nate,” Riko responded, “Surely you don’t mean that.”

Neil recognizes the words for what they are, a threat. And decides to ditch the last of his self preservation at the curb.

“How could I not?!” Neil smiles. “I have Jean and Kevin with me. And let’s be honest, Kevin was the one who got around me in drills.”

The crowd ooooooh’s as Neil speaks. And Riko’s grip turns bruising.

But Neil continues to speak despite Riko’s warning grip, “And Jean is the best backliner I’ve ever met.”

“Taking yourself out of that equation?” Kathy asked.

Neil braced for pain, “I don’t hold a candle to Kevin and Jean, but I am good enough to beat Riko,” Neil said.

Riko takes hold of Neil’s wrist in a bruising grip. Neil is afraid it will break.

“To be honest,” Neil says speaking again, “I think Kevin and Jean were being held back at Edgar Allan. Under Riko’s captaincy, they really didn’t have time to grow. And it’s true that Kevin is completely starting over. And Jean has to work with an entirely new backline. But let’s be real. Kevin has full capability to learn how to play with his right hand. Edgar Allan missed that potential and that’s their loss. And Jean is working with backliners who have the potential to be the best on a national level. Have you seen our goalkeeper’s stats. Andrew plays better than the Raven’s goalie, and our goalie has to play on court ordered medication with some seriously bad side effects. Not to mention that once Seth pulls it together, he can be a serious threat on the front line as well. That goes for all the foxes. We may be a small team, but we put up one hell of a fight. Once we pull together, the world better watch out.”

Neil’s hand has gone numb from the way that Riko is holding it.

Kathy’s grin is huge.

“Anything to say to that Riko?” Kathy asks.

Riko finally releases Neil’s wrist.

“I guess we’ll just have to see on the court, won’t we?”

The tone is dangerous. And Neil barely hears Kathy cutting to a commercial break. Neil sends Jean and Kevin a look that says ‘run’. And the two are scrambling while Neil still sits in Riko’s lap. Neil gives it ten seconds. Then he books it as well. The foxes were already gone. Out of their seats and hopefully back on the bus. And by the time Neil unclips his microphone and gets off the stage, Riko is behind him, and the backstage is empty.

The wall collides hard with Neil’s face, and Neil chokes on a groan, his wrist throbs and his skin crawls as he lays on the ground, writhing in pain.

The kick to his ribs comes next, and Neil wheezes.

Riko picks Neil up by the collar and throws open a door.

Neil kicks when Riko gets close and dives for the door. Riko tackles Neil to the ground. Holding Neil down as he struggles.

“You haven’t been behaving,” Riko says, pulling Neil’s hair. Neil panics when a needle is pressed to his arm.

“Stop it,” Neil says. And Riko slams his head into the ground and presses the plunger down.

But Neil was done. He was a fox. And he would go down swinging or he wouldn’t go down at all.

Neil slams his elbow back into Riko’s face and books it out the door. He stumbles a bit, the drugs Riko put into his system making him woozy already. He fell to his knees. He would fucking crawl if he had to.

“Now now Nate- “

“Riko!” Neil heard Andrew’s shout. Andrew walked towards Riko and Neil, a huge smile plastered on his face.

Riko halted in his motions and then glowered at Andrew. “Leave.”

Andrew presses a finger to his chin, humming. Then he shrugs, “Nah, I don’t feel like it. Actually. I don’t think Neil feels up to whatever you want him to do either, so both of us will be leaving.”

Neil tries to stand, he really does. But a kick sends him sprawling. There’s a slam and Riko is suddenly pinned against the wall. Andrew has a knife to his neck.

“I said,” Andrew says dangerously, “Neil and I will be leaving.”

Andrew drops Riko, and then turns to Neil, “Yes or no?”

Neil is still caught off guard by the question, “Yes.”

Neil winces as Andrew picks him up off the ground.

Neil’s head is foggy.

“Andrew,” Neil breathes, “He drugged me.”

Andrew’s grip clenches slightly. But he doesn’t respond. Neil stumbles along, and Andrew walks perfectly.

When they finally make it back to the bus Neil collapses on the floor at the front.

“Jesus Christ!” Dan says, “Andrew what the hell- “

“Riko drugged him,” Andrew responds.

“Jesus,” Matt breathes, “We should get him to the hospital in case he- “

“No, no, no,” Neil giggles. The drugs Riko gave him this time had such a different effect than the cracker dust had.” Riko only gives me enough to make me pliant. He doesn’t want to fuck a dead person. But I fight too much otherwise. Like I told Kevin. I bite.”

The foxes are silent, then. “Jesus this is so fucked,” Seth’s voice is loud.

“Andrew,” Neil says, “I need to see Kevin and Jean.”

“You can barely stand,” Andrew responds.

And it’s true. Neil feels like a puddle melting into the floor.

“Doesn’t matter,” Neil’s speech began slurring, “Help me get back there ya fuckin’ asshole.”

Someone chokes.

“I’m tempted to leave you right here,” Andrew said.

“Fine!” Neil said throwing his hands up, “When ya don’ get ta kill me ‘cause I already died. That’s on ya.”

“I hate you,” Andrew says.

“Say it all ya want,” Neil slurs, “I hated me first.”

Andrew dumps Neil down unceremoniously in front of Kevin and Jean. And Neil goes through his checks.

“What is he- “

“He’s checking for injuries,” Nicky chokes out, “He did it in Columbia too. Neil, hun, your wrist.”

Neil pauses and looks at his blackening and blue wrist for a moment, before logging it as unimportant.

“It’s fine,” Neil waves his uninjured hand.

“Neil,” Abby says staring, “You need to take care of that.”

“I don’ wanna be touched.” Neil slurs.

“That’s fine but at least take care of your injuries yourself then.” Abby responds. She obviously didn’t like Neil refusing her help, but she was willing to compromise.

Neil sighed, finishing his check of Kevin and Jean. “Fine.” Neil said.

Neil stumbled to his feet and shucked off his jacket, before throwing off his shirt.

The foxes had seen him shirtless before, but never this close. And they hadn’t been able to look for long. The scratches on Neil’s back from during the show were bright red and angry looking. And the bruise on his hip was dark and ugly.

The silence that settled over the bus was almost sobering. But only enough that Neil could see the look on every fox’s face was regret.

“Stop it,” Andrew stood in front of Neil. The drugged smile slowly leaves his face. He was due for his next dose. “You’re not going to be happy you did and said this shit when you’re sober.”

“Abby told me to take care- “

“You can do it at the tower,” Andrew says, “Go sit down.”

“I need to talk to you,” Neil says.

“Then sit in my seat,” Andrew responds, “Either way, put your shirt on and sit down.”

Neil considers the options for a moment, before shrugging on his shirt and stumbling to Andrew’s seat.

“All of you keep your mouths shut,” Andrew says warningly.

Andrew slides into the seat next to Neil and sits down.

“I need a smartphone,” Neil says. Andrew hums and gestures to Nicky. Nicky hands over his phone.

Without missing a beat, Neil logs onto the Edgar Allan school site, happy to see his login still worked.

Neil scrolled down to the team roster. “We can expect a response tonight,” Neil slurs, “I’m gonna assume you’ll still go to Columbia. Neil opens up the team roster, and then scrolls down to the up and comers. “Riko might show himself. And the main team is an obvious choice for people he gets to do his bidding. But ultimately these guys are also threats. If you see them, you need to go someplace safe.”

Neil hands the phone over to Andrew, and Andrew stares at him for a moment before glancing at the phone. Neil points at a particular picture, “Carey is a dick. He uses drugs as well,” Neil states, “Watch your drinks, he’s short and hard to notice, but he’s quick and did

some magician's camp crap. Sleight of hand bullshit. You won't notice he was there. If you're unsure, dump the drink."

Neil continues to give Andrew pointers, and at some point Abby comes back to watch Andrew take his drugs. But even after the drugs are taken, Andrew focuses on what Neil is saying.

"Are you coming with us?" Andrew asks.

Neil shakes his head, "Then he'll definitely go after you. I'm going to stay away from Jean and Kevin tonight. I'm trusting you to keep them safe for me. Promise me you'll be alert."

Andrew's eye's meet Neil's. And despite the drugs, Neil sees sharp clarity underneath.

"I promise."

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neil awoke laying on someone's shoulder, and he panicked. His fist shot out, catching whoever it was in the stomach. There was a stumble of movement and then Neil was hunched over and wheezing.

This was a fight he was in a fight-

"Fucking Christ! Why the fuck are you fighting!?" Wymack's voice cut through Neil's panic. And Neil finally looked over to see Andrew wheezing just as much as himself.

"Neil woke up and punched Andrew," Nicky said, he was looking at Neil like Neil had just signed his own death warrant.

"Sorry," Neil wheezes, "I don't normally fall asleep with someone next to me."

Neil coughs and sputters a few times. Andrew was next to him, trying to regain his composure. Apparently both of them struck out with killing intent when they woke in a panic.

"I fucking hate you," Andrew spoke through gasping breaths.

"Can't hate me more than I hate myself," Neil groans.

The foxes stare in amusement as Neil and Andrew try and get their bearings.

A few of them look like they want to comment, but Andrew glares and they all decide against it.

“Sorry,” Neil responds again, “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep without moving.”

“You passed out while explaining the Raven threats,” Andrew responded, “I went through the rest of them on my own though.”

Neil nods.

“I want to take my turn,” Andrew says, “My extra one.”

Neil nods, signalling Andrew to go on, “Did all of the ravens on there rape you?”

Neil chuckles dryly, “Are we calling it rape now?”

“You didn’t want it.”

“Whores don’t get raped,” Neil says simply.

“Good thing you aren’t a whore,” Andrew responds. “If you didn’t want it, and they didn’t ask or care about your consent, then it’s rape.”

Neil shrugs helplessly, “By that logic, every Raven that’s gone to Edgar Allan since I was six, and who isn’t named Thea, Jean, or Kevin, has raped me at least once.”

“So you won’t mind if I stick a knife in any of their necks?” Andrew asks.

Neil grins, "I'll only mind if you don't show me a video."

Neil intends to go to bed and sleep a bit before he has to get up and spend the night watching the door. Neil didn't trust campus police as far as he could throw them. However the foxes catch Neil before he can crawl into bed.

Andrew's group wandered off to get ready for Columbia and so Neil was left to stare at Dan.

"Can we talk?" Dan asked. She fidgeted nervously.

Neil stares at the room, the rest of the upperclassmen were all staring at him. And Renee gestured to the empty seat beside her. Neil sighed and sat down. At some point he was going to have to listen and talk with them. And honestly, Neil was feeling the smallest bit of relief.

Matt was hanging over the upperclassmen and giving them all a disappointed look. Neil knew from overhearing their conversations, that Matt had wanted to start with just talking to Neil.

Nobody spoke for a while and then finally Renee spoke up, "We wanted to apologise. We were wrong and misjudged you. And I think even without meaning to we treated you quite awful. We're sorry."

Neil shrugged, "Okay," Neil said, "It's fine."

All the heads in the room snapped up to look at him. And Neil is surprised that he didn't hear their necks actually snap.

"Dude," Matt said staring around the room, as if unsure how to proceed, "Not that I'm not happy that you're forgiving us and everything, but isn't that a bit fast."

Neil shrugged, "You guys were protecting Kevin and Jean. I can relate."

The upperclassmen stare at Neil, all of their faces questioning.

“I’ve protected them since the day I knew them,” Neil responds, “I’ve stood in the way of Riko for them. I got them out of the nest. I even stole the Master’s car to get Kevin out. I’ve done some shit to keep them safe. At the end of the day, they are all that matters.”

There is a moment of silence.

“What about you?” Renee asks quietly.

Neil’s brows furrow, “I don’t matter.”

The upperclassmen’s brains seem to stall out.

“Neil that’s not- “

“Jesus- “

“You matter too,” Allison is the first who manages the words with such conviction, “And we’ll be owing you for a long time for all the shit we pulled at the start of this year.”

“Really it’s fine- “

Allison holds up a hand to cut Neil off, “Say it again and I’ll hit you. You matter. What we did was wrong. And if you sit here and tell me it’s fine again and your reasoning is that you don’t matter, instead of we actually redeemed ourselves; I’ll steal one of Andrew’s knives and stab you myself.”

“Bold of you to assume I am scared to die,” Neil responds shrugging.

Allison shakes her head, choosing to not respond.

The cousins start heading out for Columbia around two hours later. Neil was still awake, and had heard them leave their dorm. The upperclassmen had left a bit ago, minus Seth and Allison, to grab supplies for a movie night.

Neil heads out the door and over to Andrew’s group.

“Take one car,” Neil says, “They know Jean’s car too well. Stick to populated places, but keep them out of crowds. I’d keep Aaron and Nicky off the dance floor tonight. Riko has used all methods of administering drugs. Park your car in well lit areas, and check for tampering before you drive it.”

Neil counts off all of the possibilities in his head, and suddenly he hears.

“Yes or no?”

Neil pauses in his analysis, “Yes.”

Andrew’s hand settles on the back of Neil’s neck, already Andrew was coming down from his high. “I promised, didn’t I?”

Neil nods.

A noise from behind them startles Neil. The upperclassmen were back, but that’s not what Neil’s mind focused on. Neil watched as Seth and Allison, dressed to go out, left their dorms.

“Shit,” Neil mutters under his breath.

“You’re going out?” Nicky calls to Allison, his voice is tense.

Allison shrugs, “I see no reason to stay inside and show Riko we are afraid of him.”

Neil tenses. They *should* be afraid. “You should be afraid,” Neil says before anyone else can say anything, “Don’t go out.”

Allison shrugs, “We’ll be fine. There will be too many people out for Riko to do anything.”

Neil’s mind raced. If Neil wasn’t able to be gotten to then Riko would go after any teammate of Neil’s he could. And neither Allison nor Seth were any match for any of the Ravens Riko could send. He didn’t trust either of them to be vigilant or memorize who they should be looking out for. Neil’s stomach dropped.

“We should stay in,” Renee said, “It’s not safe.”

If Renee’s words didn’t get through, nothing would.

Neil bit his lip as Seth shook his head. “We are going out.”

Neil steeled himself, “Fine then I am going too.”

Heads snapped in his direction, and Kevin grabbed Neil’s arm.

“Neil no,” Kevin’s eyes were full of panic, and Neil ignored him. He snatched his arm away.

“Consider a night out on the town as repayment for being a dick to me,” Neil said.

Allison stared for a moment before nodding in assent. “Alright,” she said. “But you need to change.”

Neil nodded in understanding, and tried to ignore the pit in his stomach.

Renee power walked over to him, and Neil didn’t bother to look at Andrew. And Neil didn’t give Renee a chance to speak.

“I know your history,” Neil said,” And Riko knows it too. I need you to stay here, protect them here. And Andrew has Kevin and Jean. I’ll take care of Allison and Seth. I’ll make sure they get home safe.”

“Neil!”

“No Kevin,” Neil says,” I was the one who pissed him off, and no one here deserves to deal with the consequences of my actions.”

Kevin stares at Neil, both of them knew that this night was going to go wrong. Both of them knew it.

“Jean give me your phone,” Kevin chokes out.

Jean hands it over without question.

“You call us,” Kevin says,” If something happens. I swear to god- “

“I swear I will,” Neil says, “Or I will try to.”

No more words are spoken, but Andrew gives Neil one last look before he follows his group out the door.

After changing, Neil meets Allison and Seth downstairs. The two are making out when he arrives and Allison gives him an appraising look.

“You clean up nice,” Allison says with a wink.

Neil rolls his eyes.

“Are we taking your car?” Neil asks.

Allison shakes her head,” No we don’t drive drunk, so we take a bus down and a cab back.”

Neil nods and follows Allison and Seth to the bus stop.

The busride isn’t long, but it’s stressful. Neil watches every person that boards the bus, looking and waiting for one to end up being a familiar face. None were, but Neil still felt exhausted by the time the bus pulled up to the bar.

The bar was loud and obnoxious, it was so different from Eden’s Twilight that it was absurd. Neil figured that’s because it was a sports bar.

They found a table easy enough, and Allison went off to get drinks.

Neil looked around whilst still keeping one eye on Allison. The crowd was taller than Neil, and it was setting his frayed nerves even more on edge.

“Did you mean it?” Seth asked suddenly, pulling Neil from his thoughts.

Seth wasn’t looking at Neil, but instead he was looking at the table.

“Mean what?” Neil asked confused.

“On Kathy’s show,” Seth gestured, “You said I could be a force to be reckoned with if I got my shit together.”

Neil stared incredulously, “Of course I did. You wouldn’t play college sports on a full ride if you didn’t have potential.”

“I play on the fox version of college sports,” Seth scoffed.

Neil let his eyes gaze back at Seth, “And?”

“And the only reason we are recruited is because we have pasts.” Seth points out. “It has nothing to do with our game.”

Neil stares at Seth, “Of course it does. How many Exy players do you think there are in all of the United States? I bet plenty of them meet the standards of having a troubled home life or a drug addiction in their past. Wymack recruited you because he saw your potential to be better than that. The only one who stops you from being great now is you.”

“It’s my last year,” Seth says, “I don’t think I have much of a chance now.”

Neil rolls his eyes, “When you’re ready to stop moping and start trying, I’ll be willing to train you myself.”

Seth looks up at Neil, his eyes widened, “Seriously?”

Neil shrugs, “Just stop being so much of a dick.”

Allison finally gets back to the table with drinks. And Neil relaxes a bit when she shows up.

The night goes on and the sky grows darker. Allison and Seth are dancing together. And Seth wanders off after giving Allison a kiss on the cheek.

Neil watches as Seth stumbles to the bathroom. Allison heads back over to the table. Five minutes pass, and Neil’s eyes catch someone in the crowd.

“Carey,” Neil mumbles under his breath. It felt like the air got punched from his lungs.
“Allison go stand by the bouncers, do not drink anything else.”

Allison stops talking and stares at Neil wide eyed, but Neil is already heading towards the bathroom.

Carey stands with Kaiser. The two were still in highschool, not set to be signed until the next year. But both of them were strong. Carey was short and built, and Kaiser was tall and buff. Seth stood talking to them. But when they see Neil, everything freezes.

Kaiser had been trying to give Seth a bag of drugs, no doubt the pills were far over the overdose limit.

“Seth we need to go,” Neil says. Then he sees it, a glint of silver. And Neil is lunging at Carey. Carey swings and misses. But Kaiser tackles Neil to the ground and Neil watches as Seth get’s stabbed with the knife.

“Fuck,” Kaiser yells, “We need to go.”

Neither of them had planned on getting their hands so dirty. The two sprint from the bathroom in a panic. And Neil presses his hand to Seth's stomach trying to staunch the blood flow.

"Can you tell Allison- "

"No," Neil says, pulling out his phone and ignoring the trembling of his fingers, "You're going to tell her yourself. Shut up."

Seth groans, his head falling back onto the ground.

A 911 operator answers, and Neil speaks as fast as he can. He ignores the racing of his heart and continues to apply pressure.

Seth babbles the entire time, and Neil is thankful the man is at least keeping himself awake.

When the paramedics eventually come rushing in, Allison is on their heels.

"He's going to be fine," Neil says before Allison can ask.

Allison's eyes are full of tears, "You were right, we should have just stayed- "

"Don't worry about that right now," Neil responds. "They'll allow one person in the ambulance with him. Go."

Allison looks between Neil and the paramedics, and Neil gestures again. "Go. I'll find some other way back."

Finally it seems that Seth's pale face won out, because Allison followed the paramedics to the ambulance.

No cops showed up, and that made Neil feel uneasy. The whole situation was wrong, and it made him hesitant to call any of the foxes to come pick him up. So Neil washed the blood off his hands and moved quickly out the doors to find a cab. He saw one parked at the end of the street, and so he made a run for it.

Then something hit the back of his head. And everything went dark.

Neil awoke on a pile of leaves next to a creekbed. His headache and he groaned. His eyes fell on a familiar figure and Neil froze. Neil scrambled up and back, but legs stopped him from moving further.

"Nate," Riko said smiling, "How impolite. I brought you all the way here so that you could scream as loud as you wanted, and you back away from me?"

Neil trembled, and Riko struck out, punching Neil across the jaw so hard Neil flew sideways.

Neil landed at the muddy edge of the creek and Riko pressed Neil's face into the water, holding Neil down.

Neil kicked and struggled. He held his breath for as long as he could but soon he was sucking in water. Riko finally yanked Neil back out of the water.

"I'm willing to offer you a place back with the Ravens," Riko said, "All of it will stop, Jean and Kevin will be safe."

Neil breathed. And for a moment he almost said yes but-

Yes or No?

“Shove your offer up your ass,” Neil spits, “I’m a fox.”

Riko shoved Neil into a tree. Neil’s back collided hard and he fell.

Reacher, Carey, and Kaiser all stared at Neil with malicious grins. And Riko undid his belt.

“This’ll be fun,” Riko said smiling.

It lasted hours. Maybe even days. Neil stopped feeling it after some time. But he felt it when it was done. He passed out as Riko and the other three crawled back up the incline to the road.

“You’ll take my offer eventually,” Riko said. Neil couldn’t respond, his body was already giving way to unconsciousness.

When Neil awoke, he could barely move. He felt his pants around his knees, and using one hand he managed to pull them up and reach into his pocket.

He turned on Jean’s phone, and his heart clenched at all the notifications. It was 4 am in the morning, and the texts were still coming up till about an hour before then.

Neil played through the messages.

Dan

“Neil I know we were shitty to you, but God we are so worried. Allison called us from the hospital. She said you should have been back by now. Neil please call us back.”

Matt

“Neil dude, if you get this call us. Renee said you have Jean’s phone. I’m hoping you just dropped it or something.”

Renee

“Neil, we really need you to call us. It’s been 2 hours, we are really worried. You matter to us.”

Allison

“Neil we can’t find you anywhere, we were out looking but Coach told us to call it a night. Neil you can’t just save Seth and then fucking disappear without letting me hug you.”

Seth

“Neil you gotta pick up man, the doctors wouldn’t let me leave to help look for you, man you have to pick up.”

Nicky

“Neil, we are all really scared. Just tell us where you are?”

Aaron

“Neil, Nicky is crying. Just pick up the damn phone.”

Kevin

“Neil Andrew is driving us back from Columbia. Neil pick up please.”

Neil’s heart clenched and he ached everywhere.

There was a single message from Andrew.

Call me.

Neil knew he needed help. He was hurt. He could barely move. His shoulder was dislocated.

Neil texted Andrew.

Go somewhere private.

Moments later the phone began to ring. Neil answered it.

“Where are you,” Andrew’s voice is calm, and it’s exactly what Neil needs at that moment.

Neil lets out a dry laugh, “I don’t know.”

Andrew is silent for a moment, “Share your location,” Andrew finally says.

Neil manages with minor difficulty. And Andrew goes to hang up.

“Wait!” Neil shouts. The sound echos, “I need you to bring some stuff.”

Neil lists the items he needs.

Soap

Pain Meds

Shampoo

A change of clothes

Bandages

Toothbrush

Toothpaste

Water

When he finishes, the line is silent.

For a moment Neil wonders if Andrew hung up, but then Andrew speaks. “Anything else?”

Neil is silent and then he laughs, it’s horrible and broken sounding, “What else would you bring for someone who’s just been fucked against their will.”

“I’ll be there in 30 minutes,” Andrew says.

Neil hangs up, exhausted and tired. His body and mind are in tatters. But his heart is full when he thinks of how Andrew was coming. The guy didn’t have to. And Neil doubted any of this was going to be glamorous.

Instead he tried to focus on the list of things he needed to do. He ran them over in his head until he heard a car pull up. A door shut and steps could be heard coming down the slope.

“Neil!” Andrew called out looking for Neil.

“Here,” Neil croaks out.

Neil prepares for the disgust, for the pity. But Andrew’s face is blank. And Neill almost breathes a sigh of relief.

Andrew carries a black duffle slung over his shoulder. And he kneels down in front of Neil.

“What’s your routine?” Andrew asks. And Neil’s mind halts. There is something to that statement, but Neil couldn’t think about it at the moment.

“I need to relocate my shoulder,” Neil says, “And check for any other breaks, sprains, or dislocations. Do you know how to relocate a shoulder?” Neil asks.

Andrew stares at Neil for a moment, he doesn't tell Neil to wait till he sees Abby. He just moves to the side of Neil where Neil's arm is hanging limply.

"Yes or no," Andrew asks.

"Yes," Neil chokes out.

Andrew maneuvers Neil into a more stable position, he takes hold of Neil's dislocated arm. He counts.

Neil bites back a scream as his shoulder is relocated. His body slouches but Andrew catches him before he hits the ground.

Neil breathes heavily. "I need to vomit. They made me... I need to..."

Andrew doesn't need to hear. He's already let go of Neil and asked-

"Yes or no? I'm going to help you over to the bushes."

Neil nods.

"I need a verbal answer."

"Yes."

Andrew nods, slinging Neil's arm that wasn't injured over his shoulder, and placing his arm around Neil's waist.

Andrew practically carries Neil over to the bushes, and he doesn't react as Neil forces himself to vomit. Soon Neil doesn't need to force himself anymore and he's simply puking because the sight of the white fluid coming out of him, and the smell, and the taste... are all enough on their own.

Andrew holds Neil's hair back, and keeps a hand under Neil's chest so that the red head doesn't fall into his own vomit.

Neil's body trembles with over exertion, and he forces out a hoarse. "I need to brush my teeth."

Andrew nods, and repeats the process of 'yes or no?' and dragging Neil to a new spot near the water's edge.

Neil brushes his teeth. Three times. Rinsing his mouth with the water that Andrew had brought.

Neil shudders when even three times brushing and the strongest flavour of mint didn't erase the taste.

"I can still- "

Andrew is already holding out a hand with a stick of mint gum in it. Neil almost sobs in relief. But Neil doesn't cry.

Neil breathes for a moment, allowing the strong taste of peppermint to invade his senses.

"I need to- " Neil pauses, "I need them off of me."

He didn't know how he was going to bathe, the creek was the obvious choice. But Neil could hardly move.

“Strip down to your boxers and I’ll help you with your upper body,” Andrew says,” I’ll turn and you can lean on me to do your lower body. If you can’t do that, then you can wait till we are back.”

Neil struggles internally. Mulling it over. But ultimately-

Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Neil’s voice is shaky. And Andrew nods. Andrew pulls out a set of new clothes and sets them on a rock nearby. He pulls out a hoodie and places it down too, alongside a towel.

Andrew helps Neil remove his shirt, and Neil removes his own jeans while leaning on Andrew. Andrew rolls up his pants before they go into the water, but ultimately it was pointless when he has to kneel down and help Neil wash his hair anyways.

Andrew complies when Neil tells him to wash each area three times. Andrew doesn’t even blink. And as promised he turns and gives Neil his back as support as Neil goes through washing each part of his lower body three times.

Neil finally finishes, and he tugs at Andrew’s shirt, unable to find his voice.

“You won’t look right?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Andrew keeps his eyes pointed at the sky as he drags Neil back out of the water. His hands never even slip despite Neil’s skin being wet.

He keeps his eyes up as Neil tugs on the soft sweatpants. And at Neil's request he turns to help Neil tighten the drawstring. He helps Neil into a button up shirt, and a zip up hoodie.

“Your other clothes?”

“Burn them.”

Andrew nods and lights them on fire without a second thought. They watched until the clothes burned up, and Andrew stamped them out.

Andrew drags Neil to the steep incline back to the road after grabbing the bag.

“I can't- “

Yet again Andrew knows.

“I'm going to put one arm under your knees, and one arm behind your upper back. I'll carry you up. I can give you a knife- “

“Don't give me anything sharp.”

Andrew just nods, “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Andrew hoists Neil into his arms and carries him to the car. A soft blanket and a package of dried fruit are in the seat as Neil climbs in.

When Andrew finally gets into the driver's seat, Neil speaks.

"I want to take my turn."

Andrew turns expectant.

"You understand... Don't you?"

Andrew's jaw clenches. And Neil can see the withdrawal Andrew was fighting through to be there.

"Foster care," Andrew answers. "I understand."

The strongest flavour of toothpaste.

The breath mints.

The blanket.

The button up so Neil didn't have to lift his arms.

The yes or no?

The knowing.

It wasn't Andrew being a decent human being. It was perfect understanding.

Chapter End Notes

Back when I was younger I was in a situation where I couldn't get out and the Sexual Assault was repetitive. So I put together a duffle bag full of stuff that I could easily get to, something so I had it all in one place.

And much like Neil in the story I would have a routine that I followed.

Years after I got out I had to use it, but not for myself, for a friend. I walked her through my routine while explaining what was going to happen and where. I keep the duffle now constantly in case someone I know calls me in need of it.

Inside are:

Altoids Spearmint flavour
An oversized button up shirt
A pair of drawstring sweats.
A zip up hoodie
Tea tree shampoo
Peppermint scented soap
Mint toothpaste
A toothbrush
Bandages
And pain medicine.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry guys!!! I know it's late!!! But uh here. I've been at work all day. I pulled like a 13 hour day of cleaning up after shitty ass people. Then when I went for my run I fell and now my knee is swollen and shit. so I apologise that this is the only one for tonight. Maybe I might get another chapter. But I've got to be up at 6am again tmr.

"He offered me a place back at Edgar Allan," Neil said, the silence of the car had grown to be overwhelming after five minutes." Said he'd stop going after Jean and Kevin."

Andrew flicked a glance in Neil's direction. There was a shaking to Andrew's hands, and Neil was reminded yet again that Andrew was staving of withdrawal to be there.

"You didn't take it." Andrew said, though it was more of a statement than a question.

Neil laughed, it was humorless, "I told him to shove it up his ass... I think he got the directions wrong."

They fell into silence, and Neil's mind wandered to the understanding Andrew had shown.

"The deal I got out on," Neil says, "It's with Ichirou Moriyama. If the foxes win Championships, I will be allowed to live my life only having to donate 80% of my Professional Exy salary to the main family."

"What about Jean and Kevin?" Andrew asks.

"They'll be free no matter what come the end of the year." Neil says, " Even if we lose Championships or don't make it."

"Why not tell them?"

"Because then I'd have to tell them what happens if we fail," Neil isn't looking at Andrew, instead his gaze is out the window. His head rests on the cool glass as his fingers shake. "If we fail I have choices."

Andrew doesn't speak, so Neil continues.

"Go back to the nest, go back to my father, or Ichirou uses me to get a Trafficking ring to back down quietly."

"Uses you?"

"He gives me as an offering," Neil clarifies.

Neil swallows.

Andrew is silent.

"If we fail, I'll be taking my own life. I won't go back to the nest... I refuse. My father would be killing me anyways. And I've seen plenty to know I won't enjoy being a sex slave either. I'm either living free, or dying free. I refuse to go back."

"And yet you'll allow yourself to be raped, beaten, and tortured so that Jean and Kevin are safe." Andrew says.

Neil is silent for a moment, "I can put up with it for one more year. At the end of this year I'll either have protection or I'll be dead. And Jean and Kevin will be protected too. I just have to survive this year."

There is a moment of silence again, and then Andrew moves. He clip a key off his keyring and tosses it to Neil.

"What is this?"

"A key to the house in Columbia," Andrew responded, " As of now you're under my protection."

Neil's eyes go wide, " No." Neil says, " No I'm not."

"You don't decide who I protect," Andrew says.

"I do if it's a deal," Neil responds.

"Good thing it's not a deal then," Andrew responds.

"You don't work without deals," Neil said, " This isn't how you do things."

"Would you take a deal if I offered it?" Andrew asked.

"No." Neil responds.

Nobody should be trying to protect Neil. Nobody should care. Neil was dirty, used, disgusting, broken. He wasn't worth the trouble of someone standing in front of a bullet for him.

"That's why I didn't offer you one," Andrew points out, " You already painstakingly do the one thing I need you to without one anyways. You keep Jean and Kevin here, and you don't plan on leaving or on giving up on them. But it's in my best interest to keep you alive."

"You don't understand," Neil says shaking his head, " Riko is only a small part of how dangerous I am to be around. If you promise to protect me you're either going to fail or you're going to die. Don't do this, I'm not- "

Neil cuts himself off. They were sitting at a red light. The streets were completely empty. And a red glow had passed over Andrew's features. None of that was why Neil stopped though. Andrew had turned to look at him, with a face of resolve and understanding. Andrew's eyes said everything without his mouth ever needing to.

It made Neil's words catch in his throat.

"I refuse to back down from standing in the line of fire if it means protecting Jean and Kevin," Neil says, " I refuse to hide. I refuse to keep my mouth shut and obey. If you protect me, you're going to have to stand in that with me. I'm not an easy person to protect and I refuse to make myself one."

"I'm counting on it," Andrew responds. The light turns green and Andrew drives.

Neil's body feels no better when they finally get back to the tower. All the aches and pains were sharper now. And Neil knew standing wasn't an option for at least another day.

Andrew seemed to know it to though, because he was at Neil's side of the car as soon as he left his. He waited while Neil wrapped the blanket more around himself, and after a quiet 'yes' Andrew was carrying him again.

Neil was amazed at the way that Andrew could hold him. Even at three inches shorter than Neil, Andrew could move efficiently and effectively with Neil's lanky frame and weight in his arms. The way the blanket was wrapped, only Neil's bare feet and hair poked out. Andrew's chest was a warm comfort against Neil's panic as they ascended the stairs.

"Relax," Andrew said, "Everyone is in your dorm, I'm taking you back to mine. You can fall asleep and talk to them all come morning."

Neil relaxes, he's practically already drifting off when Andrew places him on the soft bed.

Neil awoke to voices in the kitchen. He blinks blearily and goes to sit up, only to let out a sharp cry of pain.

"Neil!" Nicky says, the smile on Nicky's face is small and obviously forced. But still the relief settled there is real, "I'm so glad you're awake. The team went to see Seth at the hospital. Andrew made Kevin and Jean go, they were being a bit overbearing and trying to wake you up all night, so I think Andrew got irritated and punished them with seeing Seth. And also Allison says she wants to hug you, and we were all really really worried- "

"Nicky I need pain meds," Neil groans out midway through Nicky's tirade.

Nicky stands up quickly, "Oh shit, yeah... okay let me go get them!"

Nicky flies out the door, and Neil flops his head onto the pillow behind him. Neil closes his eyes, trying to will away the pain he felt everywhere. But closing his eyes only made him feel hands too.

He trembled, wanting them off. Wanting them all-

"Neil?" Nicky's soft voice cut through the fog. "Is it okay if I help you sit up."

Neil trembles.

"It will be easier to take the medicine and drink something if you're sitting up," Nicky says, "If not I'm sure we can figure out a different way."

"It's okay," Neil said shakily, " Help me up."

Nicky carefully places one hand on Neil's shoulder and one on Neil's back. But Nicky's hand on his back is too low.

"Too low," Neil says, and Nicky freezes, " Your hand is too low."

Nicky moves his hand and Neil relaxes some. Finally they get Neil sitting up and Nicky hands Neil pain meds and water. Neil swallows the pain meds and then chugs the water.

They sit in silence for a while. Nicky eventually finds a textbook to read, and Neil counts internally, trying to keep the memories of the night prior at bay.

Neil hadn't really talked to Nicky much since arriving at Palmetto. At first Neil had been turned off by the guy's massive boundary issues. But at the moment he just wanted someone to talk to him, and keep him from thinking.

"Can you talk to me?" Neil asks. He curses himself for how pitiful he sounds.

Nicky fumbles when closing his textbook, " Yeah... uh... sure... what about?"

"Anything."

Nicky is silent for a moment and then Nicky begins to speak. Nicky talks about Aaron and Andrew, and he talks about Germany. Nicky talks about his fiance Eric.

At the beginning of the conversation Nicky is tense, but eventually Nicky is relaxed and prattling on about nothing in particular. Like he was just happy someone actually wanted to listen to him for once.

Neil wondered if that's why the guy tried to interject into conversation so much.

During one story about Eric, the door to the dorm slammed open and Kevin stalked into the room.

Jean was close on his heels, but he looked much less angry than Kevin did.

Nicky trailed off midway through his story and looked between Neil and Kevin.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Kevin says angrily.

His anger made Neil's own flare up. "I actually wasn't able to think much with Riko's dick shoved down my throat, but I'm glad you think so highly of my mental capabilities."

Nicky's mouth dropped slightly ajar. And Neil isn't sure if it's because he hadn't figured out what happened, or because of the bluntness of Neil's statement.

"I mean at the bar!" Kevin snapped. "You should have called someone to come pick you up! Why didn't you?!"

"I wasn't sure how many Ravens were out hunting us and I wanted to make sure no one got hurt!" Neil shouted back, Neil could see the other foxes congregating in the doorway. "I thought I could catch a can back! I got hit on the head as I was running to the cab and I got taken to some God awful place near a creek! I didn't ask for this Kevin!"

"That's not what I'm saying!" Kevin shouts, "I don't know how to get you to understand that people give a shit about you. You did this at Evermore too! You pulled this shit where you'd

step in and protect us! And every time Riko dragged you off neither Jean nor I would know if you were coming back!"

Neil stares.

And Kevin storms out.

"We were worried," Jean says quietly, "You weren't picking up the phone. And the location on it was turned off."

Neil was silent. Because having Kevin mad at him hurt. It hurt worse than anything Riko did to him.

Chapter 16

Seth was released from the hospital Monday morning. And Neil didn't have any classes that day so he was at the dorm, alongside Matt, when Seth arrived.

Matt was in the middle of cooking himself a bowl of Ramen when the door slammed open.

"HEAVEN DIDN'T WANT ME AND HELL COULDN'T KEEP ME!!! I'M BACK MOTHERFUCKERS!!!" Seth shouted loudly. And Neil was suddenly glad most of the dorm building's occupants were in class.

"You sure it's not just that Hell didn't want you either?" Matt said, but there is a smile on his face. "It's good to have you back Seth."

Seth smiled, and then his gaze landed on Neil and his smile dropped.

Neil knew why. Despite being an entire day since the attack, the bruises mottled his face into a picture of greens and blues, there were bite marks still prominent around his neck, along with hickeys and even more scratches. Neil wore clothes that covered the rest of the damage. But there was enough able to be seen that Seth would have no trouble knowing what happened.

Seth looked pained. "I should have listened when you told us to stay in that night," Seth says, "This shouldn't have happened."

Neil shrugs. "There's no point in regretting it," Neil says. Even though he himself couldn't seem to stop beating himself up over the night.

It didn't help that Kevin was doing his damndest to avoid Neil entirely.

"Not regretting putting you into that position is harder than you think it is," Seth says after a moment.

The conversation was too heavy. Too constraining. It felt wrong to have someone care like that. Neil felt the word 'undeserving', that was carved across his chest, burn.

"Did the stabbing leak all of the dickishness out of you too?" Neil asked.

Seth flipped him off, "Shut up asshole."

They all settled in to watch movies, and Matt made popcorn after finishing his Ramen. The day passed slowly. Neil was fidgety. Wymack had told Neil that he couldn't practice until Neil could walk without a limp. And Neil was not yet able to pull it off. So when Matt eventually got up to practice, Neil was left on the couch alongside Seth. Relegated to the sidelines.

"Are you pouting right now?" Seth asked Neil after Matt left.

"No!" Neil says far too defensive for someone who hadn't been pouting.

Seth laughed, and went back to the movie, and Neil went back to not-pouting.

"Hey man," Seth said after the movie finished. The credits still rolled across the screen, "I thought a lot about what you'd said, while I was in the hospital I mean."

Neil glanced at Seth and was genuinely surprised at what he saw.

He'd seen Seth many different ways, the main way was asshole. But he'd also seen him loving, when with Allison. Playful, with Matt. Injured, on the court.

But Neil had never seen Seth so vulnerable.

Seth had a giant comforter wrapped around him. The guy wore horrible striped pants, and a tank top. Fluffy socks were on Seth's feet that just had to be Allison's. His legs were criss-crossed, and his shoulders were hunched. The normal look of defiance, and 'fuck you' was completely gone. And in exchange was a look of vulnerability and uncertainty.

Seth was older than him by nearly five years, but yet the guy looked as young as 12 sitting next to Neil like that.

"I imagine they didn't give you much else to do there," Neil says, finally remembering it was his turn to speak, "Hospitals kind of suck."

There was a dry chuckle. But then silence. And then Seth spoke again.

"I was so scared I was going to die there on the bathroom floor. It was weird cause I've never really been scared to die, never really saw the point in surviving past college. But I had Allison and she makes me better you know. And something you said must have resonated or something because all I could think was, 'The moment everything clicks is the moment I die, the story of my life'. But then you saved me, and I sat in the hospital trying to think of how to thank you. Then Allison comes running back and saying that you were missing. Man, I don't know what I'm trying to say... I'm not good at this whole thing."

"Are you trying to say that you'll do better? Because if so, don't say it. Do it. There is no point to words unless you back it up with action." Neil responds.

Seth is silent, "I feel like I need to make the promise though to someone. I need to make sure that someone other than me holds me accountable."

Neil thinks about it for a moment. "Then let's go make the promise to the entire team," Neil finally says. "If you're truly serious about this. Make a promise to the entire team. And let's do it right now."

Seth stares at Neil for a moment. Before nodding.

They arrived sweating, they had to run to make it there before the team left, and they made it in record time for two people who were currently benched because of injuries.

Neil tried to use his code on the door. But the code reader said it was incorrect.

"He probably changed it," Seth said, "And didn't give you the code because he figured you'd practice despite his say-so."

Neil huffed. It sounded like a challenge.

The next place that he tried was the window to Wymack's office. It had been closed and locked.

Somehow Neil wasn't surprised to find that every window on the side of the building had been bolted. Apparently Wymack had been learning.

Neil came to his last option. Hidden along the back of the building was a fenced in maintenance area that Neil easily got into. A ladder to the roof was blocked at the bottom half by a bolted gate. Neil picked the lock and opened up the gate and began to climb.

"You're joking." Seth deadpans. "Please tell me you're joking."

Neil paused from halfway up the ladder and stared down at Seth.

"One I hate that word, don't use it around me," Neil says, " And two I'm completely serious, are you?"

Seth stared at Neil for a moment, before grabbing hold of the ladder and climbing as well.

Once on the top, Neil opened up one of the roof windows. Neil fiddled with the crank operated window until it opened further than it was supposed to. Enough for Neil to fit through, with Seth on his back.

Neil crouched down and waited for Seth to climb on.

"Dude..." Seth said, "You are half my size."

"You always say size doesn't matter," Neil says.

"That is not even remotely relevant to what is happening right now." Seth says, his cheeks turning red.

"I thought you said you were serious about this," Neil said.

Seth opened his mouth to speak, but then thought better of it.

"Are you sure it's okay that I'm touching you?" Seth asks, "You can fully expect me to be grabbing onto you like a frightened child."

Neil grinned, "Now that I cannot *wait* to see."

Seth grumbles, "You're a dick," while climbing onto Neil's back. Seth buries his face into Neil's shoulder and wraps himself like an oversized koala around Neil's torso."

Neil realized as he stood up that he'd misjudged his own strength, but not enough to have Neil concerned.

"We are going to hop down." Neil warns, "Don't scream."

Inside the court the ceiling was full of crisscrossed scaffolding. Neil hopped through the roof and caught one with... major difficulty. Seth meanwhile, kept a death grip on Neil, that was so tight Neil was having trouble breathing. Neil swung from bar to bar, moving towards the stands. He took a momentary break and looked down to the foxes, who were practicing on the court. He wondered which fox would be the first to look up and see them, and he didn't have to wait long.

Andrew and Renee stood side by side, and once Renee saw, she hesitantly patted at Andrew's arm to get his attention. She nodded in the direction of Seth and Neil. And Neil would have awarded himself for the shocked look that briefly passes over Andrew's features, but he was too busy with not slipping.

Neil made his way from bar to bar. Eventually Neil made it over to the stands, and Neil dropped down.

He landed and promptly face planted onto the ground.

Seth got off, and Neil managed to recover. Andrew, Aaron, Nicky, Renee, and Matt had all noticed Neil on the ceiling. And were all staring at Neil in varying degrees of shock and amusement.

Wymack was also now aware. At some point in Neil's adventure across the ceiling, Wymack had noticed that at least half his team was distracted by something. And he had followed their gazes to Neil.

Wymack's jaw was hanging ajar, and he only recovered when Neil and Seth finally made it to the court.

"Hey coach," Neil said, waving.

Wymack's response was angry, "DON'T YOU 'HEY COACH' ME YOU MALFUNCTIONING MENTALLY UNSTABLE LITTLE BASTARD!!! WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING!?"

At the coach's yelling Dan, Kevin, Jean, and Allison all turned to see Neil and Seth.

"Seth wanted to talk to you guys," Neil said, shrugging, "We couldn't get in."

"SO YOU DECIDED TO PULL A DOUBLE 'O' FUCKING SEVEN ON THE CEILING!?" Wymack asked again, angrily.

"I don't know if I should be impressed or terrified," Matt's voice cuts across the court, and the words aren't meant for him but Neil still responds.

"Don't be impressed or terrified, there is no way I am doing that with someone on my back ever again. I seriously misjudged my own strength." Neil responded.

Neil's legs burned, as did his arms. His shoulder that had been dislocated only days prior screamed in protest.

Wymack goes to yell again. But seems to recognize that the yelling is getting him nowhere fast. Wymack sighs, breathes and covers his face with his hand.

"You are *never* doing *that* again, period!" Wymack says with emphasis. Then he sighs, relenting. "What was so important that you had to turn my ceiling into a jungle gym? Instead of using a phone like a goddamn normal human being."

Seth takes a step forward, "I was going to wait till later, and actually only do this with a few of you. But Neil was right... I guess... If I did this later I would have chickened out. And if I don't do it for all of you it would feel worthless."

Seth quiets for a moment, and Neil gets bored waiting the five seconds it's silent, and so he kicks Seth on the ass.

"Ow! Fuck you you little shit!" Seth said annoyed.

Neil made a gesture to get on with it. And Seth sighed.

"I want to promise you guys that I'll be better." Seth finally says. It was so silent that a pin could've been heard dropping, "I'm going to stop the drugs. I'm going to stop purposefully trying to start fights just to piss people off. I'm going to start trying to build a future in Pro-Exy."

Kevin snorts. But Kevin had moved and Neil was now close enough to kick him on the back to shut him up.

"I'm going to try to be less of a dick too," Seth says.

"That includes calling people faggots and being a dick about their sexual orientation," Neil says. And Seth glances up.

"Yeah that too," Seth says. "I'm going to stop holding myself back. I'm gonna be better. Hold me to it. And honestly I had to cling to Neil as he pulled an entire Indiana Jones Movie off up on the ceiling, just to be here... so I uh... really mean it this time."

The foxes are all smiling, Andrew is purely because of his medication. But Wymack is staring at Neil with an expression of awe. Neil doesn't really understand why. All he had done was get Seth into the stadium, and Wymack had been pretty angry about that a few seconds ago.

The foxes all congratulate Seth. And surprisingly Kevin offers Seth a nod.

Neil turned to see Andrew's reaction, but Andrew was leaning against the goal and staring at Neil. There was a calculating look in his gaze, hidden underneath a manic smile.

Chapter 17

When Wednesday rolled around, Neil was feeling well enough to go on a light jog again despite the brief setback Monday's climb across the ceiling had had on his body. Aaron caught a ride with Jean and Kevin to the court, and Nicky drove Neil and a medicated Andrew to Betsy Dobson.

Neil's leg was bouncing so much in the backseat, that Nicky actually turned around at a stop light to see why the entire car was shaking.

Andrew just smiled at Neil during his drug induced mania, seemingly amused by Neil's nerves.

Neil felt himself wishing for the moments when Andrew was off his meds. He never dared say it out loud. The team all thought Andrew was a loose cannon who was only manageable because of the drugs.

They got there a few minutes early, or maybe Betsy's session before them had run over. Either way they had to sit in the waiting room.

Neil's hands trembled as he sat there. The last time he'd been in Betsy's office, he hadn't even been able to go into the room.

"First time at a shrink tweety-bird?" Andrew asked with a grin, " They don't provide you one at the nest?"

Neil stilled.

The therapist they had provided at the nest had been less of a therapist, and more of a tool for correction. Neil attempting suicide and self harming had gotten him landed with sessions for seven months. It had been seven months of pink tinged water and bite marks.

Neil's nails began scratching at his wrist without realizing it, picking the scabs open.

"Yes or no?" The question made Neil pause.

He stopped scratching at his wrist. And suddenly he realized how tight his chest was.

He wasn't breathing.

The very idea sent him into a tailspin, and he brought his hands up to pull at his hair.

In, out.

Out, in?

In. In.

Out. Out.

Neil felt like he was going to puke. He lost the route that his breath was supposed to go.

In or out?

So he just held it. Shaking.

And then the process would start all over again.

"Neil!"

Neil gripped the edges of his chair. Things were getting fuzzy. He pitched forward.

But an arm caught him from landing onto his face.

Neil froze. But the arm didn't stray to where it shouldn't go. It just pushed him back against the back of the chair, and let go.

It made Neil calm down, if only a little.

Neil breathed and looked at Andrew. The medicated smile still sat on Andrew's face.

"You have too many issues, Wesninski," Andrew smiled, "You might want to consider losing a few."

"I feel like throwing myself off a bridge might be quicker and less painful," Neil said.

"I can arrange that."

"I'd pay you to."

Andrew looked at Neil for a moment, his smile never fading. But after a minute he just shook his head.

"Oh Tweety Bird." Andrew said, shaking his head, "All the king's horses and all the king's men could never dream of putting you back together again."

"Impressive did you think of that rhyme yourself?" Neil said back raising an unimpressed eyebrow.

"Where's that rock that they kept you under, it'll be perfect to hit you with." Andrew said, leaning back in his chair.

"Why?" Neil asked confused, "Was it a reference."

"I weep for your childhood," Andrew said.

"Don't bother, I never had one."

"Tragic."

A throat clearing caused Neil to flinch. Andrew raised an unimpressed brow, but he turned towards Betsy with a grin.

"Bee!" Andrew called. "Buzz Buzz. Get it Neil? Or did they forget to teach you animal sounds growing up too."

"I remember that the Ass says 'My name is Andrew'," Neil bit back.

"See Bee," Andrew said gesturing to Neil, "Such a smart mouth, but also such a dumb ass."

"You think my ass is dumb?" Neil said, cocking his head to the side, "Why have you been looking?"

Betsy let's out a laugh, startling Neil into looking at her.

"Sorry," Besty says laughing, "I didn't think anyone could keep up with Andrew's remarks like that. It's good to see you boys getting along. Andrew, are you ready?"

Andrew got up, "Ready when you are."

Betsy led Andrew back, and Neil stayed in his chair. Despite how much Neil hated the medicated side of Andrew, he still missed the comforting presence Andrew brought.

Neil caught himself as he thought that. He had thought that same thing about Riko. He had trusted Riko. He had found comfort in Riko. And then Riko had-

Neil puts his head forward between his knees, feeling sick. The events of Saturday rushing forward.

"No."

"Hold him down."

"Stop."

"You know how to beg Nate."

"Fuck you."

"Wrong answer."

"Neil?"

"You betrayed me Nate."

"You betrayed me first, you impotent prick."

"I think you need to apologize for that. Such a quick little tongue. Put it to use."

"Neil, I need you to breathe."

Kengo's bed.

The therapist's office.

The Nest.

The locker rooms.

"I've got it Bee."

Be a good boy.

You deserve a reward.

You've been bad.

Don't bite.

"Yes or no?"

Whores don't get to-

Yes or no?

Neil's eyes snapped up to meet Andrew's. And Neil felt himself take a gasping intake of breath.

"That's your second one today Tweety-bird," Andrew says, "I think it's time for a therapy session don't you?"

"Time to go to therapy Nate."

Neil jolts back away from Andrew. "No."

Andrew's eyes narrow, but he takes a full step back. Betsy watches from even further back.

"I won't go back," Neil says, grabbing tightly to the chair. "I won't go back. I know what happens in a shrink's office. I won't go back."

Betsy glances at Andrew, but Andrew isn't looking at her.

"You heard coach Tweety-bird," Andrew grins, "This isn't up for negotiation. You're just as crazy as me. So unless you want to start sitting on the bench I suggest we take a trip back."

"No." Neil says quietly.

It's too soon after Saturday. Every wound and memory feels too raw. Neil had come to get used to it in the nest, breakdowns like this stopped occurring, and Neil had stopped saying anything at all after Jean and Kevin left. He didn't beg, or fight. But after a summer away, and a handful of "yes or no's", Neil was ripped raw all over again after Saturday's event. It felt like tearing open stitches.

"No." Neil repeated more firmly. But his hands shake.

"Bee give us a second."

Betsy walked a distance away without argument. It made Neil's shoulders untense.

"I want to take my turn," Andrew said, "tell me why you won't go back."

Neil took a shaky breath, "Because shrinks are there to punish you. Evermore sent me to a shrink too. I won't do it. Not again."

Neil trembles.

"Punish you? Are you afraid Bee is gonna spank you- "

Neil cut him off with a glare, " You know what I mean."

Andrew's eyes darkened even through the haze of the drugs, " What part of I'm protecting you now did you miss? Do you think I'd let you walk back with someone who'd do shit like that to you? Do you really think my protection is that flimsy?"

Neil was silent, "I didn't ask for-"

"Yeah yeah, we've been over this. Your self esteem got dropped down a bottomless pit and now you need therapy. That's what we're here for." Andrew says. Neil didn't think he imagined how the smile felt slightly.

Neil's hands shook.

"Neil," Betsy's voice cut through, "What if Andrew came back with us? That way you aren't alone with me. We can do that until you trust me."

Neil swallows, his eyes flick to Andrew's, "I'm okay with it. But if Andrew doesn't- "

"Come on Bee," Andrew cuts Neil off, "Let's take the road runner back. Oh? What do we work on first? His crippling trust issues? Or the self esteem dropped in the deepest parts of the ocean?"

Neil followed in a daze as Andrew stood between him and Bee. Neil already felt exhausted.

Neil hesitated when entering the room, but ultimately found that instead of cookies, the room smelled like peppermint. The strong smell overpowered the room and Neil found himself stepping inside easily.

"Andrew said you might like the smell of peppermint," Betsy says smiling, "He told me you dislike the smell of dessert."

Neil nodded absently. The candle, which was the source of the smell, was brand new and had just been lit.

Neil found himself relaxing into the smell, and soon into the comfy couch that Betsy had in her office.

"Make yourself comfortable," Betsy says smiling, "Is there anything you like to drink? Hot chocolate?"

Neil's hand shot up to his mouth as a found taste invaded his sense just at the thought of tasting chocolate.

Andrew stared at him, and pulled out a stick of gum, "You are a tragedy."

"Maybe I should sell my life story to the Greeks," Neil says.

"Now you are sounding like Kevin," Andrew says smiling.

Neil glared.

It was strange how easily Andrew could coax the fight back into Neil. And Neil had to wonder if Andrew did it on purpose.

"You never answered my question," Betsy says interrupting, "Is there a type of drink you like."

Neil is thoughtful for a moment, wondering if maybe this would backfire. If maybe something else he loved would become nothing more than a trigger after he said it. But Andrew had said that wouldn't happen.

Yes or no?

"I like tea," Neil finally says. His voice shakes a little, and he pulls his feet up onto the couch to tuck them under himself. His shoes felt uncomfortable. Neil looked over at Andrew and saw that the other had shucked off his own shoes and was sitting with his feet up on the table.

Betsy didn't say anything about Andrew doing it, so Neil followed suit, only he tucked his legs underneath himself.

Betsy never responded to Neil's answer so he was surprised when a cup of tea appeared in front of him.

Neil stared at it. Untrusting.

But Andrew noticed and took a sip of it. "See!" Andrew said, "No drugs. Go ahead and drink it."

Neil took the mug into his hands and took a sip.

Betsy settled into her chair.

"Last time you had a bit of a rough time," Betsy says. "I'm sorry about that by the way."

Neil shrugs, "It's fine."

Betsy beams. "You and Andrew seem pretty close."

"Close to killing him maybe," Andrew says.

Therapy continued much the same way. Andrew consistently threw in jokes and jabs, derailing Betsy's questions entirely. But it relaxed Neil. The more that Andrew quipped and

jabbed, the more the entire environment felt safe.

And Betsy didn't seem to mind it either, though she kept a close eye on Neil. Gauging his reactions to certain questions, and watching as he interacted with Andrew.

By the time they were heading out the door of therapy, Neil and Andrew were bickering again. It was never heated, and it surprised Neil that it felt a tiny bit like bickering with Kevin and Jean. But yet at the same time, it felt different.

Nicky drove them back to the court, grinning at Neil and telling Neil about a call he'd made with Eric that morning.

The smile on Nicky's face when he talked about Eric was blinding, it was so much more real than the ones he gave when joking with the foxes.

When they finally got to the court, the foxes were still practicing, and Wymack was on the phone as Neil and Andrew changed out.

Andrew gave Neil a look, "You know Wymack isn't about to let you practice Tweety-bird, so how about you go build a nest or something."

Neil still got dressed and grabbed his racket. It was then that Wymack shouted into the changing rooms for Andrew.

"Andrew Joseph Minyard! What the flying FUCK, have you done this time?"

Andrew raised an eyebrow and Neil looked at him.

"Normally it's me getting yelled at for doing stupid shit," Neil says confused, "What did you do?"

Andrew looked just as perplexed as Neil though, but he quickly wiped it away and the crazy smile was back in full force. "It wasn't me, coach! How do you know it wasn't our new resident problem child!?"

Nevertheless Andrew left the changing room and Neil followed after him.

"My *new* problem child didn't just get asked for on the phone by the police. Andrew, what the hell have you done?" Wymack asks.

Andrew shrugged, "Maybe it was my stunt double. You don't know."

"You're stunt double doesn't cause nearly as many problems as you," Neil mumbles under his breath.

"It seems I've forgotten," Andrew said, tapping his chin, "Who was it that played spider monkey on the ceiling the other day?"

Neil glared. But he stopped when Wymack turned back to the phone.

"What seems to be the problem, Officer... Higgins, was it?" The words left Wymack's lips and Neil tensed.

Andrew shot Neil a look, and it briefly distracted him from Wymack's conversation.

Neil could see the way that Andrew's body tensed, and Neil also knew enough about Higgins.

Officer Higgins had been a person from Andrew's past. He was the one who told Aaron about Andrew in the first place. Riko had spent many hours pouring over information and paying

for it. That knowledge paired with what Andrew had told Neil of his past, that small little bit.

"Foster care... I understand."

Told Neil that the conversation was meant for Andrew and Andrew alone.

Neil snatched the phone away from Wymack and ignored the confused yell that Wymack gave in response. He passed the receiver to Andrew.

Andrew took it, but he didn't press it against his ear. Instead he favored Neil with a questioning look. Probably wondering how Neil knew Higgins' name.

"Don't keep him waiting, Minyard," Wymack gruffly said.

Andrew pressed the phone to his ear.

"Pig Higgins, is that you?" Andrew asked. His face was still twisted into a smile. And Neil wondered if his face hurt at the end of the day. "Oh, it is. Yes I'm surprised. Did you forget I hate surprises. What? No, don't stall. You clearly wouldn't have hunted me down after all this time to chat so what do you want?"

There was a few minutes of silence, and Wymack regarded both Andrew and Neil suspiciously. Likely thinking that Neil had been an accomplice for whatever the cops were calling about, especially with how Neil had snatched the phone.

There was a short, "No." From Andrew and he hung up.

Neil raised an eyebrow. And Andrew regarded him with the same twisted smile. The phone however began to ring again.

Andrew stared at it like he wanted to throw it off a bridge.

"I can answer it," Neil offered, "I've been told I'm good at putting people off."

"I think that's the truest thing you've ever been told," Andrew said. He answered the phone again.

The foxes all watched with interested looks, and Neil turned to them. The fact that they were staring at a conversation that was probably linked to Andrew's past made Neil feel a surge of protectiveness. Andrew's past was his to share.

"Staring is rude, you know," Neil said, "Let's get moving."

The foxes all seemed slightly embarrassed at being caught. And honestly Neil was going to use the moment to run off and start doing drills, but Wymack caught him by the collar.

"You aren't practicing." Wymack said.

Neil scowled. And Wymack kept a grip on the back of his shirt.

In the background, Andrew continued to talk to Higgins and then he hung up again.

There was a moment of silence, and then the phone rang again. Neil almost grabbed the phone and told Higgins to fuck off himself, but Wymack still held tight to the back of his shirt.

Neil didn't feel right listening to the conversation. And honestly he just wanted to practice a few precision drills.

Neil slipped his arms through the sleeves and slipped out of the shirt. Wymack stared at the empty shirt in his hands, and then stared at Neil in tired exasperation.

Andrew finally answered the phone again, and Neil was about to slip past and just practice shirtless, but Andrew caught him by the straps of his armour.

Neil frowned, annoyed and resigned himself to becoming deadweight.

Andrew silently listened to the phone and held Neil up effortlessly. After about thirty seconds Neil held out a hand for his shirt like he was accepting defeat. And put it on in about ten seconds, then he grabbed his racket, and Andrew had him by the shirt yet again. Neil resigned himself finally to listening to the conversation.

Andrew's smile was slowly falling off his face as Higgins talked at him from the other end of the phone.

"Go back," Andrew cut in finally, "Who complained? Oh, Pig, don't give me the runaround. I know where you work, you see. I know who you work with. That means there's a child in that house. She isn't supposed— what? No. Don't ask me that. I said don't. Leave me alone. Hey!" Andrew's shout startled Neil hard enough he flinched, "Call me again and I'll kill you."

Andrew hung up. And when the phone didn't ring again, he looked to Neil. Neil began to reach for his racket, but Andrew kicked it and it slid across the court.

Wymack glanced between Andrew, who had just had a police officer call him. And Neil who wouldn't stop trying to get free so that he could practice.

"I really don't know which of you to yell at first," Wymack said, "It's exhausting."

"Why would you need to yell at me coach?" Andrew asked, feigning innocence. Neil tried to use the moment to get away. But Andrew kicked his legs out with one foot and so Neil dangled from his grip like a petulant child getting scolded.

"I hope that question is rhetorical," Wymack gruffed.

Andrew shrugged and moved past Wymack, dragging Neil along with him.

"Minyard where the fuck do you think you're going?" Wymack asked. Neil turned and bit Andrew's hand. In response, Andrew flicked his forehead.

"I'm taking your second problem child back to the dorm," Andrew said with a smile, twisting his expression. "Unless you want to spend all practice trying to yank him off the court."

Neil glared, and Andrew flicked him again.

Wymack gave a long look at Andrew, "Are you coming back after?"

"No," Andrew said.

Kevin stepped forward angrily, "You can't just skip out of practice—"

"Blame Neil," Andrew said, shrugging his shoulders, "I'd of course come back, but Neil here would run right back like the roadrunner he is."

Neil turned and glared, "Liar," Neil said, "Don't you blame—"

Andrew flicked Neil again.

Kevin was glaring at both of them now, and the sight made Neil's insides twist. Kevin had never regarded him with this level of anger for this long. Suddenly he was all for trying to escape practice for the day.

He stood up and crossed his arms. Andrew let go of the hold he had had on Neil's shirt.

"Minyard we will be talking about this," Wymack said.

"Sure we will Coach," Andrew said waving his arm about.

And then Neil followed Andrew off the Foxhole Court.

Chapter 18

Neil frowned when they skipped the car to walk back to the dorms. Neil had assumed they would wait outside for the others. Honestly he figured maybe Andrew would get distracted enough that Neil could run off and sneak a racket outside to practice a bit

"Why aren't we- "

Neil started to ask but Andrew cut him off.

"Because a certain little roadrunner is having trouble understanding what 'no practice till your better means'. Did someone drop you on your head as a child?" Andrew said.

Neil shrugged. "Probably. I mean my Dad once used me as an ironing board."

Andrew paused mid-step and raised an eye at Neil.

Neil pulled his shirt away from his shoulder. The older scar was overlapped by a few newer ones and honestly it paled in comparison to the abuse that came years after. But a special amount of fear came with any memories of his father. The only thing that kept them from being more terrifying than Riko, was the fact that Nathan was in prison.

A gift Kengo had given to Neil. Neil hadn't asked him to, but Neil doubts that the lack of Neil's involvement did much to temper Nathan's rage towards his son. But Nathan wasn't a problem yet, and hopefully Neil would be protected or dead before Nathan could become one.

"Can I take my turn?" Neil asks. The drugs were obviously still coursing through Andrew's system, but Neil could see a hardness to his jaw and eyes. Andrew's hands were in his pockets, but Neil assumed that they too were clenched tight.

"You're a brave little bird," Andrew grounds out. It's a dangerous threatening tone. Neil assumes he's meant to be scared. But Neil hasn't been afraid of dying in years. And Andrew couldn't do anything worse than Riko had. "I could kill you, you know."

Andrew's hand comes up and presses against Neil's throat.

"No," Neil says. And Andrew's hand is snatched back in seconds.

Neil smirks, his point proven. "You could but you won't. Don't make offers you can't keep."

Andrew stares at Neil for a moment, "I hate you."

Neil just waves his hand in dismissal, "Can I ask a question?"

Andrew pulls out a cigarette and places it between his lips, before taking out his lighter.

Neil takes it as an allowance, "Why did Higgins call you?"

Andrew looked at Neil, "I hope you realize I'll be asking a question of equal importance."

"Scary," Neil says dryly.

Andrew takes a drag of his cigarette and blows smoke into Neil's face, "A kid came forward from one of my old foster homes. Higgins was asking me if I knew anything."

Neil nodded. And Andrew took another drag before asking his next question.

"How'd you get Jean out? Kevin was obviously let go because of his injury, but Jean wasn't permanently maimed." Andrew says.

Neil's blood turned to ice. Because regardless of what Andrew knew of him already, what would he think when he knew Neil had agreed to what Kengo had done. He didn't want to find out.

"No," Neil's voice came out.

"I told you a question of equal-"

"And I said no," Neil said, taking a step back, "You may think that's a question of equal importance. But that answer will cost you."

Andrew regarded Neil for a moment, "How much is the cost?"

"More than you're currently willing to pay," Neil responded.

Andrew nodded, "How do you know so much about our pasts?"

"Riko researched you guys in depth after Kevin left. He sent people out to scout for information, he paid people off. And eventually he gave the information to me thinking I'd do something with it." Neil laughed at the memory.

Andrew gave a questioning glance. And Neil elaborated.

"I bitch slapped him with a file folder this thick," Neil gestured till he was showing the thickness of about a dictionary and then shrugged, "He got knocked the fuck out. I'd caught him off guard, and super hard across the face."

"I'm betting you had a rough night that night," Andrew said dryly.

Neil huffed and looked at the path they were walking, "Trust me, you have no idea. After I refused to read the file folders and offer any help towards finding Kevin. He read them to me while I was being torn apart by Reached. It was kind of like a sick twisted version of a bedtime story, so I guess I can check that off my list."

Andrew's manic grin was starting to fall.

"Do you need your meds?" Neil asked.

"I'll take them when we get back," Andrew says, "Take your turn."

Neil thought for a moment then asked, "Riko hadn't found anything about what you told me Saturday. But I doubt he stopped looking, and if the police are connecting you to something that has to do with *foster care* then he'll find it. I won't ask names. And I won't press. But be honest, is one of those people still alive enough to be a threat."

Andrew glances at Neil, and lets out an exhale of smoke, "Yes."

Neil nodded. And Andrew was silent for a few moments.

"You're the only person who isn't scared of me off my meds. Why?" Andrew asked. They had reached the tower, and so Neil sat down and leaned against the brick wall. Andrew followed suit.

Neil questioned whether or not he should tell Andrew. But truly, Andrew already knew well enough what Riko could do.

"At one point," Neil said, "I protected Riko too. I protected him against his Uncle and the older Ravens who we practiced with. He used to take care of me after. He'd clean all my

wounds. He'd hold me as I broke down. And he promised to protect me as soon as he had enough power and pull to do so. But when the day came, he was named captain. He turned around and hurt me instead. And he did so with the biggest smile on his face. He laughed and he got off on it. Saying he never gave a damn about me. And looking back he didn't, he just wanted me to protect him. You don't scare me, because I've seen what real monsters look like. Real monsters don't ask 'yes or no'."

Andrew is silent at that. But his gaze is locked on Neil's face. Eventually Andrew tore it away and took out his medicine. Taking one of the pills. The medicated smile returned and they sat, waiting, for the foxes to return.

When the foxes finally got back, there was a tension between the Upperclassmen and Aaron, and Nicky was avoiding Seth entirely. Kevin was angry with Jean, and Jean had a specific look that said he was pissed at Kevin right back. Renee looked tired as she approached.

"Do you need me?" Renee asked.

Neil's brain short circuited. Because the way Renee had asked had been oddly intimate. We're they—

Neil looked between the two with wide eyes.

"Are you two fucking?" Neil asked in shock.

Andrew and Renee shared a glance and Renee smiled in amusement. She looked over to Neil with a smile, "No we are sparring partners."

Neil relaxed some. Though he's not really sure why he tensed up in the first place.

Andrew just got up and dusted himself off, "Let's go Renee. We are taking the bird with us."

"Why am I going with you?" Neil glared.

"Because I can tell that you're about to go flying back to the court to practice. Heads up Tweety-bird, you're an awful liar." Andrew says.

Neil glared and conceded that he wasn't about to get out of this. He followed Renee and Andrew into the building and up the stairs. They didn't stop at the foxes floor and instead continued up to the roof.

Neil sat off to the side.

"Knives or no knives?" Renee asked Andrew.

"Do knives," Neil says without looking at them, "See if you can cut the assholiness out of him."

"I'm about to see if I can cut the smartass out of you," Andrew retorted.

Neil smirked, "Riko already tried and it didn't go so well for him did it?"

Despite Neil's kind request, Renee and Andrew set their knives next to Neil for safe keeping. Neil picked up one of Andrew's and began subconsciously twirling it between his fingers with practiced ease.

Renee and Andrew sparred. Renee was cold and calculating, and Andrew was quick and unforgiving with his blows.

It went on for around thirty minutes before Renee turned and saw Neil flipping the knife around.

"You know how to handle a knife," Renee says, " And you have your own, but you claim your aim is bad. And you don't seem like a very good fighter."

Neil glanced at her. Her observation was just that, an observation. And Neil shrugged.

"I was an awesome fighter for a four year old, when my father first put a knife in my hand, but I got lousy after being taken to Evermore. I wasn't allowed to fight back, and there was no way I would ever win in a fight against 5 college level backliners as a six year old. So I guess you can say I have the basics but I'm inexperienced. Riko gave me the knives as a joke when I picked up self-harm." Neil looked away, not caring about her reaction.

Andrew was drinking water and stretching.

Renee glanced at Andrew and then back to Neil. "Would you like to spar with me now?"

Andrew paused at that, bottle halfway to his lips and glancing at Neil. Waiting for Neil's response.

"Just you?" Neil asked with a smirk. "Make it interesting. Let's do both of you at once."

"Maybe another day," Renee says with a smile.

Neil stands with the help of Renee, and remembers how baggy his shirt was.

Neil sends a glance back to Andrew, who was watching with an eyebrow raised.

"So you won't let me practice," Neil says, removing his shirt, " But you'll let me spar?"

"Maybe I'm hoping you'll get some sense knocked into you," Andrew shrugged, and Neil huffed.

Renee lunged at Neil and Neil dropped just in time to avoid the blow. Keeping one leg and one arm on the ground he kicked to knock out Renee's feet. But Renee took a step back, and Neil flipped back onto his feet.

Andrew watches from beside the knives, "Where did you learn how to be such a monkey, Tweety-bird?" Andrew asks, and Neil watches Renee cautiously as she circles. "I highly doubt they taught you how to be a monkey in the nest."

Neil responds, eyes not leaving Renee's calculating form. "I used to hide from Riko in tough to reach places. You learn how to be pretty acrobatic to reach some of them. I consider it to be a nice survival skill."

Renee dove at him, and Neil twisted and grabbed, he threw a punch but Renee caught it and then threw him, sending him sprawling. He rolled as Renee went to hit him again and he kicked out, catching Renee in the chest. The two retreated to breathe and recover, but they circled each other and watched each other carefully.

"Was one of those places the ceiling of the court?" Andrew asked.

Neil smirked, lunging forward at Renee and catching her on the shoulder before dodging her blow to his face. "How'd you know?"

"Context clues," Andrew responded. Neil looked back at him to find Andrew smirking. The smirk was so unlike the smiles Andrew normally gave, and even through the medicated haze Neil could see something that made Andrew's eyes glimmer. Andrew's eyes appeared golden, and Neil was struck by the sight. Then by Renee's fist.

Neil groaned as he hit the ground, "I claim unfair as he was distracting me," Neil points at Andrew.

Andrew cackles. Renee rolls her eyes. "You were here and Andrew still won so I revoke that claim."

Neil stared at her, confused. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Renee just smiled and walked off. And Neil was left staring at the ground as Andrew left as well.

Later that night, after Andrew, Kevin, and Jean got back from their night practice, Neil snuck out and ran to the court.

He snuck in and began running his drills, and then running the court, and then running the stands. He was trying to outrun his thoughts, his fears, the hands. And a lingering feeling he had in his chest whenever he thought of Andrew. Neil didn't like it. He'd had a similar one with Riko years prior. And that didn't bode well for Neil.

"Do you need a 24 hour babysitter just to keep from killing yourself?"

Andrew stood at the top of the stands. And Neil startled, tripping over his own feet and face planting.

Andrew gave him a look and walked down to where Neil was, putting a hand out to help Neil up.

Neil took it and stood.

"We are leaving," Andrew said.

"But—"

Andrew cut Neil off," You need sleep as much as you need practice Junkie."

Neil paused. There was no way he was going to convince Andrew into letting him stay. And Andrew knew he'd won and started walking to the car.

Neil sighed and followed. Climbing into the car after Andrew.

"How was I distracting you on the roof?" Neil asked.

Andrew was silent for a moment before a simple,

"You're interesting."

Chapter 19

Practice on Thursday was a mess. But arriving at the court Friday was complete and utter devastation.

Neil normally left before the foxes, choosing to run to the stadium as opposed to letting one of the foxes drive him to the court. It gave him time to think and chill out for a second before being back around the foxes' rowdiness. Normally he would leave enough time for himself to get there as the others were arriving. But he hadn't left in enough time, and so the foxes were already in the locker room when Neil arrived. The lounge was full of shouting.

"Maybe you should watch where you're fucking going!" Nicky's voice shouted. It was so generally out of character, that Neil's brain actually had to take a second to recognize the voice as Nicky's.

Nicky never shouted, he was a lover not a fighter. He had strong opinions of course, but he normally settled his issues with sharp jabs and jokes that got under someone's skin.

"I fucking tripped you faggot!" Seth shouted back, "What's your fucking problem?"

Neil heard Renee's calming voice, and he knew the fight had to be bad. Normally Renee allowed the foxes to duke it out themselves, she allowed them the chance to find their own footing and settle their own disagreements. If she was trying to calm people down, then something was going wrong.

Neil walked into the locker room and saw that Renee was holding Seth back with the help of Matt, and Dan was holding Allison back. Kevin and Jean were busy holding back Nicky and Aaron. But Andrew, ironically, was the only fox staying out of it. Wymack was nowhere to be seen.

"Fuck you and your entire group!" Allison fired at Nicky. "All he did was fucking tripped, you were the one that fucking shoved him without second thought. Your entire group is just a bunch of fucking monsters."

Andrew cackled at this, "Hear that Nicky? You're just like me."

"Fuck off," Aaron snarled at his brother.

Andrew looked ready to respond but Nicky was firing at Seth, "I don't get how everyone can just say you're some perfect fucking angel now! What? Because of some promise! You were a fucking dick to me since I got here, I don't believe a second of you being able to change."

"Yeah you wouldn't believe in change would you?" Seth spat, "How did conversion therapy end up for you?"

"Fuck you!" Nicky said, renewing his struggles, "You had Saturday coming! You should have fucking died."

Seth got free of Matt and Renee and slammed Nicky against the lockers.

Neil saw Andrew move, but Neil was closer. In seconds Neil shoved Seth off and shoved him. Then he slapped both men across the face.

There was a shocked silence. And Neil's entire body shook. He hadn't realized how angry the two comments had made him until he had moved.

"We are foxes," Neil said, "That means we say some pretty messed up things. But the shit that just exited the two of your mouths was beyond awful."

Seth and Nicky began to try and justify their actions. But Neil held up both his hands.

"You," He said pointing at them, "were both fucking wrong. Seth I don't know where you get off throwing conversion therapy in someone's face like that, but let me tell you that

brainwashing isn't fun. And it doesn't fucking feel great. And Nicky, telling someone they deserved some form of trauma over a fucking argument, way to remind me of the fucking nest."

Nicky and Seth recoiled as if they had been slapped a second time.

"Everyone sit down and stop talking to each other," Neil ordered, "We have a game tonight, and in case you've forgotten, we are a man down. Now is not the time for the foxes bullshit."

The locker room shifted into silence, and Wymack finally appeared in the door.

"I heard shouting," Wymack said, "What the fuck happened?"

Dan sputtered for a moment. Looking between Wymack and Neil. Her eyes wide.

"There was a fight," Dan said, "But... uh... Neil put... everyone... in their place."

Wymack raised an eyebrow, but Neil ignored him. He was still feeling rage over the comments that had been said. Maybe it was because the blows had been so below the belt that Neil couldn't help but think of the ravens.

Wymack huffed, "Well alright then. Moving on. Tonight we only have two strikers, and that's going to be a problem. Neil, I'm assuming from seeing your endless energy supply many times, that you can play a full match."

Neil nodded, "Yes Coach."

Wymack nodded, "The only problem that remains is that Kevin can't. This is his first season back, he won't survive a full game. The only one that can fill in for him is Dan, and the only one we have that can fill in for a defensive dealer is Renee."

Nicky sputtered, "But Coach," Nicky said, "Without Renee, who's playing Goalie in the second half?"

Wymack glanced over to Andrew, and by that regard, Neil who was sitting right next to Andrew. Andrew's gaze shifted to Neil, as if thinking Wymack meant to put Neil in.

"Coach," Andrew says lazily, "I know Neil is the jack of all trades master of none, but I doubt even he can be a striker and Goalie. Unless he's found a way to clone himself."

"Never know," Neil says, "I might be saving that trick."

"The day you have a clone is the day I end up killing you."

"Is that a promise?"

Wymack interjects before the conversation is carried even further off the rails, "I was looking at you Minyard."

Andrew raises an eyebrow, "Coach knows that my medicine doesn't work like that. Don't we already push the limit with how long I stay off them as is."

Andrew grins his maniacal grin. And Neil stares.

Neil hadn't known that Andrew came off his meds for games for sure, but he had a pretty good idea. Andrew at practices was too spacey and distracted to make any effort at all, Andrew during games was far sharper and focused.

Andrew's medicine made him too distractible for the Goalie to be much of use while on them. So Neil had figured that Andrew had to come off them during games. Neil just hadn't realized

that the entire team knew.

"I know," Wymack said, "But I'm offering you a deal. Same terms and conditions as last year. Abby already has a bottle packed, it's yours as soon as you're off the court."

Instead of responding Andrew looks to Neil and says, "Pick a number between one and five."

Neil glances at Andrew. Unsure of what he means. But the team makes an odd noise. Neil stares at them confused.

Neil wondered if it was a trick question, "Two." He finally responded.

Andrew leaned back and looked at Coach Wymack, "You heard him Coach."

Neil was still confused, but Wymack was looking between Andrew and Neil. One of his eyebrows raised. He looks like he's ready to say something but then, "Above my pay grade." Is all that exits his mouth. "Alright you maggots get moving towards the bus. We've got a six hour drive ahead of us."

The foxes began to shuffle about and grab their things. Matt left to help Wymack load the stick rack. And Neil worked to get his gear. He admired the travel duffle for a moment. The colors were so different from his Edgar Allan bag. And his number, ten, was emblazoned on the side. No longer Number 3. Instead he was Neil Abram Wesninski number 10 striker on the Palmetto Foxes College Exy Team.

A loud bang down the line of lockers, started Neil out of his amazement. Andrew was opening and closing his locker for no particular reason. He did it two more times, and then Kevin caught the door.

Neil could see the fighting before it happened. Kevin's face was twisted and ready for a fight. And Neil felt himself bristling, Kevin had always had the tendency to get into fights when upset about something. Neil isn't surprised that now wasn't any different.

"What's going on?" Kevin asked, "You can't play a full game without your medicine!"

Neil had to agree, but probably for different reasons than everyone else. Andrew's withdrawal came in 3 stages. Mental and physical crash, Sickness, and homicidal urges. The foxes all seemed afraid of Andrew in that third stage, but Neil couldn't find it in himself to be afraid. Instead he was worried. Andrew was going to put himself through hell that night so that the team would win. Neil doubts it feels all that great any other game, but this game would be especially rough on the goalkeeper.

"No, probably not," Andrew said, sounding cheerful. Neil's eyes locked with Andrew's when he glanced up. Neil winced.

"I just can't believe you're doing the number thing again Andrew!!!" Nicky said, though the man sounded far too pleased. Neil was still concerned about Andrew making it through the game without puking.

"Are you sure you're going to be alright?" Neil asked. Cutting off everybody else, "Playing while in withdrawal doesn't sound comfortable."

Andrew paused in what he was doing. And the rest of the foxes looked at him. Neil wondered how blind they all had to be, not to notice how uncomfortable the withdrawal was for Andrew, he wondered why more weren't worried about him.

"Don't worry too much," Matt cut in. "He's done it before."

Neil bit back the retort of, "just cause he's done it before doesn't mean he should do it again". It seemed hypocritical.

"Yeah!" Nicky said pack his bag, "Last year we found out the ERC was going to cut us from class one if we didn't start winning games. Coach asked Andrew for a miracle, and Andrew delivered. He told Coach to pick a number between 1 and 5. And that's exactly how many points he let by before shutting the other team out completely. It was so badass."

Neil felt stunned. Andrew had asked him that same question. Neil also felt a wave of disbelief pass over him. Neil had picked two. Did Andrew really think he could stop all but two?

Kevin however wasn't in disbelief. He didn't even seem to question if Andrew could do it. Instead Kevin stood up straighter. In a pose and with an anger that was far too much like Riko.

"So you're trying because Coach asked you to?"

"Kevin calm down," Jean reached to grab Kevin's arm, but Kevin shoved Jean off.

"Careful Kevin," Andrew said, "I think you're showing your jealousy a little."

"For eight months you told me no! In eight seconds you told him yes! Why?" Kevin shouted.

Andrew's gaze flicked to Neil, and Neil felt his confusion flare again.

But then Andrew flicked his gaze back to Kevin, "I think it's just more fun to tell *you* no."

Neil had lived long enough with Kevin to know those words would be what sent him swinging. And Neil knew Andrew well enough to know Andrew wouldn't hesitate to pull a knife if touched. Neil was between the two in seconds. One hand pressed to Kevin's chest and the other, not touching, but hovering above Andrew's. A burning sensation slashed on his cheek. But Neil didn't even wince. Just like he had thought, when Kevin moved, Andrew had pulled out a knife.

The cut on Neil's cheek wasn't deep, but it was deep enough that a trickle of blood rolled down his cheek.

"Jesus!" Matt called out, and he moved forward to help Neil. But Neil spoke first.

"That's *enough* ," Neil said," Kevin I know you're pissed at me. But taking it out on the rest of the team isn't fair. Andrew has his reasons and they're his own. Not your's."

"You've got nothing to do with this," Kevin snapped, "Stay out of it."

"I won't," Neil said," I know you probably hate me right now- "

Kevin's face crumpled and he went to speak but Neil wasn't in the mood for his excuses.

"I'm talking now Kevin," Neil said, and Kevin shut his mouth," I know you're mad at me right now, but that is no reason to get angry at this team. And they are my team too, so you being volatile towards them is my problem. Back off."

Neil whirled on Andrew. Andrew was staring at Neil's hand, and the way that it was positioned so that Andrew couldn't step forward towards Kevin, but still he could escape from it. And Neil wasn't touching him. Neil had done it purposefully.

Andrew's gaze floated up to Neil. And Neil glared, "You promised you'd protect them. You don't get to pull a knife on him. If he crosses a boundary, by all means clock him so hard he hits the ground. but you'd better never pull a knife on him again."

Andrew's smile was still in place. But there was an acceptance in Andrew's eyes as Andrew finally resheathed the blade.

"Let's get to the bus," Neil says. And the foxes all startle into motion.

Neil moves to go too, but Dan claps him on the shoulder, making Neil jump.

"Sorry!" Dan's hands go up, "I forgot about the no touch thing! I just wanted to say that that was amazing."

Neil shrugged, "I didn't really do much. I just told them to get their shit together."

Dan shrugged, "Yeah but... it actually worked."

Neil paused, "I mean I guess. They are all still mad at each other though. It's not like I did anything to fix that."

Dan gave Neil a cursory glance, "I think you could though."

Neil thinks about it, "I think you put too much faith in me."

Dan laughs, "I think you don't put enough faith in yourself... Look... I've never seen this amount of teamwork from this team. And I've certainly never seen Allison and Seth go three days straight without a breakup. I think you can do it. And I mean, it doesn't hurt to try does it?"

On the contrary, Neil's found in life that trying and failing hurt almost as much as never trying at all. But again saying that was a turn off for him would be hypocritical.

"I can try," Neil said, heading to the bus. Dan followed right along behind him.

When Neil got on the bus, he looked towards the back. Andrew sat by himself, per usual. In front of him were Jean and Kevin. Both of whom were ignoring each other and listening to music on their phones. And in front of them was Nicky and Aaron. Neil hesitated before walking back and plopping down next to Andrew.

The foxes gave Neil the faces of pure shock.

"I'm beginning to think he has a death wish," Seth mutters.

"Only beginning too?" Neil muttered to himself, "I must need to try harder."

Andrew had been staring out the window. But upon Neil's arrival, he slowly panned over to where Neil sat.

"I'm beginning to think you're less bird and more fly," Andrew said, "Shoo fly don't bother me."

"You don't belong to anybody though," Neil points out.

"Oh so you got that reference," Andrew says, "Good I was beginning to wonder if I'd even be able to lift that rock that they hid you under."

"I want to ask a question," Neil said.

"It's not your turn," Andrew responds.

Neil sighs and waits.

Andrew stares at Neil in silence before asking, "How do you swing?"

Neil was expecting a lot of different questions, but that hadn't been one of them. His surprise must have shown on his face because Andrew's manic smile grew.

"You have many bets right now placed on your sexuality. Not to mention plenty on whether you've ever slept with Jean and Kevin." Andrew responds.

Neil blanched, "I've *never* nor will I *ever* sleep with Kevin or Jean."

"Because they're male?"

"Because Jean is my brother and Kevin is... *Kevin* ." Neil said, gesturing wildly. "As for the bets, I thought you wouldn't partake."

"I don't."

"Then why ask?" Neil questioned.

Andrew stared for a moment, "I'm trying to figure you out."

"I'm not a math problem," Neil responds.

"I'll still solve you." Andrew shoots back.

Neil huffs, before answering, "I don't know... The only encounters I've had in that regard have been bad or ones I don't want to think about. And I don't really think about it. It doesn't seem necessary to swing, and I highly doubt anyone's ever going to want me like that. But to answer your question, I don't know, I've never really thought about it."

Andrew stares at Neil before nodding, then gestures for Neil to ask his question.

"Why are you really trying at the game today?" Neil asked.

Andrew favors him another glance. The smile is still on his face. "I told you I'd protect you Tweety-bird." Andrew says. "And that just so happens to mean helping you get to championships. Remember?"

"I didn't ask you to."

"You didn't." Andrew agrees.

"So why?"

"Because I made a promise. And I keep my promises."

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neil stayed sitting next to Andrew on the ride to Belmonte. At first he was going to move, but then Kevin and Jean fell asleep 30 minutes into the drive, and well, that was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Andrew watched him, a drug-induced smile on his face, with vague interest as Neil pulled his pencil pouch out of his bag. He pulled out his stack of post it notes, and began his work.

He stuck as many post it notes as he could on Jean, having to be extremely careful not to wake the man. But Neil had done this shit for years at the nest, sometimes it was the only way to make life interesting.

Neil looked at Andrew when he'd finished posting Jean. Andrew was staring at Neil, the smile on his face was obviously from the drugs, but the glimmer in his eye was amusement.

"Kevin's even more fun," Neil grinned, "He doesn't wake up for shit."

Andrew stood up, looking over the back of the seat in front of him to Kevin and Jean. He looked back to Neil and held out his hand. Neil handed Andrew a stack of post it notes, and together they began papering Kevin. They stuck to Kevin's face and arms but, at one point, Neil got out of his seat and papered Kevin's shoes.

None of the foxes paid them any mind, likely assuming the back of the bus would remain as uneventful as always. But Neil and Andrew eventually had Jean and Kevin looking like some sort of Office Store Bird mascot. When they ran out of post-it-notes, Neil dug around until he found his paperclips. Then he studiously applied them to each of Kevin's fingers. He was careful to make sure it didn't cut off any circulation.

When he had finished he sat down again next to Andrew.

Neil smiles at his antics. Though he knew Kevin probably was too mad at him to even retaliate like they normally did.

The thought made Neil sigh and lean back in the seat.

"Such a mood switch," Andrew comments, "I almost got motion sick with that swing."

"He hates me," Neil said, staring at the back of Kevin's seat.

"No." Andrew said, " *I* hate you. Kevin's just licking his wounds. He's still mad that you didn't call anybody for help on Saturday."

Neil huffs, "He always gets mad when I let myself get hurt for him. But the moment I don't get there in time and it's him getting hurt instead, he's crying out for me to help him."

Andrew looks at Neil at that point. Ad Neil shrugs.

"It's not like I'm upset about it," Neil says, "I'd rather him want my protection, it makes things easier. I just wish he wouldn't sit there and get mad after the fact."

"Your lack of self worth astounds me," Andrew says.

"I'm surprised that's what you're stuck on."

"Nothing about you makes sense, I'm starting to think the drugs are making up fantasies for me now." Andrew says.

Neil chuckles dryly. "I'm a pretty sad fantasy."

Andrew doesn't respond.

When they finally arrived at Belmonte, Wykack turned around. When his eyes caught on Kevin and Jean he stopped. Jean began blinking blearily awake, likely awoken by the lull of the bus engine turning off.

Wymack stared at them and then slowly looked up at Neil and Andrew, "Why the fuck do they look like knock off pianta birds?"

Jean finally sat up and looked down at his arms, then he put a hand up to his face and groaned. "I should have known better than to fall asleep with you in the seat behind me."

"Why are you assuming it was me?" Neil asked, feigning innocence.

"It's always you!"

"Andrew helped," Neil said.

Andrew was busy cackling. The rest of the foxes were staring, and trying not to laugh at the sight.

Neil doesn't know what woke Kevin. Probably an act of God. But Kevin blinked blearily awake and stretched. The paper made a crinkling noise, and a few post-its fell off. But the majority stayed in place. Kevin finally got a confused look on his face, and he looked at his arms.

The foxes were dying of laughter up front. And Wymack looked like he was just dying.

"What a pretty bird!" Dan said laughing.

"Fuck you." Kevin snarled.

"Does Kevin want a cracker?" Matt asked.

"Fuck you too!"

Neil was laughing as well, until Kevin sent him a glare so full of ice that Neil stopped. Neil swallowed and Kevin stomped off the bus trailing post-its behind him.

Jean looked from Kevin to Neil. His teeth grit when looking at Kevin. But he softened when he turned his gaze to Neil's downturned expression.

He smirked at Neil, "I'll get you good for that one Wesninski." Jean said.

Neil smiled a bit at the familiarity, but it fell soon enough. His entire life had been devoted to protecting both his brothers. To have one at odds with him hurt.

Jean sighed and got off the bus. Though he collected all his post-its and the ones from the ground and threw them into the trash.

"You know I can turn you into a doormat if you want to be walked all over," Andrew said with a grin.

Neil shot him a dirty look, "Can you crash already?"

"All in good time," Andrew said waving his hand around, "What I want to know is why you refuse to lie over for Riko, but you'll let Kevin treat you like dirt over a tiny argument."

"I stood up to him this morning," Neil said.

"Correction you stood in the way of him," Andrew said, "You stepped in between him and I. Just because you don't let him steamroll others doesn't mean you don't let him do it to you."

"It's complicated."

"It's simple," Andrew responds, his smile falling ever so slightly, you either grow a spine or you don't."

Andrew stepped past Neil and off of the bus. And Neil followed.

The Belmonte stadium was nearly the same as the Foxhole court. The only difference really was the colors. Neil hadn't realized how much he'd come to take comfort in the orange until it was suddenly gone.

Then when Neil got to the locker rooms he noticed another key difference. The showers didn't have doors.

It's not like Neil had any illusions about the other schools investing in closed showers. But he hadn't planned for it today. Edgar Allan hadn't had closed showers either, but Edgar Allan had been different from the foxes in many ways. Even though Neil *knew* that none of the foxes would try to hurt him in a completely naked and vulnerable state, it didn't make the idea of being vulnerable any easier.

Neil shook off the feeling and started to change. The foxes had seen Neil without a shirt enough times that it didn't matter anymore for that. Neil tried to shake off the idea of them seeing him completely naked after the game.

The foxes changed out and headed into the stadium. The crowd was rowdy, and being an away game meant the foxes didn't have their usual large crowd. Though Neil was sure Palmetto had a good chunk of people cheering them on.

The mascot was making rounds, and when it saw the foxes and soon the giant Terrapin Turtle was running at them.

"I just want to know what school wants the mascot of a turtle," Neil asks.

The turtle makes crude thrusts in their direction. Neil rolls his eyes and sends it the middle finger, though Nicky takes it a step further, along with Seth, and they start thrusting back at it. Wymack hits all three of them lightly on the back of the head.

Neil grabs his stick and inspects it. Twirling it a few times. Finding it to his satisfaction he slings it over his shoulders. Dan seemed the tiniest bit worried about Neil though.

"Are you sure you'll be okay for a full match?" Dan asked, and Neil glanced at her. A small smile passed over his face, and a mischievous glint twinkled in his eye.

"I've got it," Neil said. "Believe me."

Neil was used to playing a full match. At Edgar Allan he would play scrimmage after scrimmage without so much as a water break, for damn near close to five hours straight sometimes. Not only that, but Neil would also play full games at his high school team. And Neil hadn't stopped with his extreme conditioning when he left the Nest.

Dan looked at Neil's face and shrugged. Kevin was glancing at Neil, but when he noticed Neil was looking he scoffed and turned away.

You either grow a spine or you don't.

Neil shook the words away, but he couldn't help the short burst of anger he had at Kevin. He felt disgusted at himself for a moment.

Wymack called for the huddle and all the foxes converged.

The Vixens and Roxy Foxy walked onto the court though, distracting all the foxes from whatever Wymack had been about to say. Wymack sighed.

"Hi Katelyn!" Nicky shouted.

Aaron growled and elbowed Nicky, but Nicky just laughed and continued to wave. A small blonde, taller than Aaron, waved back grinning brightly.

Nicky smirked and elbowed Neil before stage whispering, "Katelyn is Aaron's girlfriend."

"She is not!" Aaron said.

Neil found he actually didn't care. It seemed like Aaron's personal business, but Nicky did care.

"She would be if you asked," Nicky pointed out.

Andrew made a noise and then hit his hand to the side of his head like he'd just figured something out, " *Oh I know,*" Andrew said in German, " *Maybe he's afraid she'll die like the last woman he ever truly loved.*"

Aaron glared at Andrew, "Fuck you."

At the same time Nicky let out a, "Christ Andrew!"

Neil glared at the Goalie, and Andrew smiled back, "I thought I made it clear that we shouldn't be starting shit right now."

Andrew shrugged with a smile still in place, "This started a long time ago Tweety-bird. Stay out of it."

Neil rolled his eyes but couldn't help the curiosity that surged through him.

"Are you guys all done wasting my oxygen?" Wymack asked, "Good now shut up. In Ten minutes you're all on the court doing warm-ups. Nicky, Neil, Andrew. Don't start shit with the Terrapins."

"Why am I getting called out?" Neil asked.

"Don't ask me that question for the sake of my own fucking sanity. Now go!" Wymack ordered and the foxes filed into line behind Dan.

Kevin ran next to Neil in the warm-ups, but Kevin was unyielding in his silence. It made Neil's earlier rage simmer to the surface all over again. Neil had given so much for Kevin. Had done so much for him. Neil at least deserved the decency of a mature conversation when Kevin was mad at him. He at least deserved his brother being there after Neil had been raped.

Undeserving.

Neil almost flinched as the word surfaced in his mind. And his anger evaporated.

The foxes ran around the court, and then grabbed their rackets and began warm-ups. Eventually Dan went over for the coin flip, and she won the team first serve. The Terrapins would be starting at home court.

Neil listened as the announcers prattled on, and his leg began to jump in anticipation. Wymack noticed. Neil wanted to be on the court. He wanted it more than he wanted air.

He realized how bad of an analogy it was in his head considering he was damn near suicidal.

He needed the court, like he unfortunately needed air, flowed much better through his mind.

Neil's name was finally called and he shot up and ran onto the court, almost knocking Wymack over.

Neil hurried past the backliners, but slowed to inspect his own.

Herrera was the backliner's name, and the man had at least a foot on Neil. Neil smirked at him, and Herrera glared. Neil waved his hand around, as if the backliner's glare hadn't intimidated him at all, and hurried to his place.

Neil's pulse thrummed as the doors were shut. His adrenaline surging. He was poised on the balls of his feet, ready to run. Ready to play.

The buzzer sounded and Neil took off. But the ball didn't come. Allison was serving, so Neil looked back to see what happened. He watched as Allison sent it back to Andrew. And Neil smirked as Andrew swung. Neil hit full speed as Andrew's racket hit against the ball. It hit the wall behind the Terrapins and came back, but Neil had it in his net before it hit the ground again. Neil took ten full steps before passing it to Kevin. Kevin was pacing himself, and didn't make it far before passing it back to Allison. Kevin's mark laughed at him for not trying harder, so, when a few moves later, Kevin's mark stole the ball. Neil checked her hard into the wall, before scoring and lighting the goal up red.

Herrera glared at Neil when Neil got back into position, but Neil ignored him and celebrated with his team.

The next point wasn't scored for another ten minutes. A back and forth of constant motion and checking on the court. Herrera was getting steadily more angered by Neil's evasioneary footwork and skills. And unfortunately, Herrera's anger only made the backliner sharper and quicker.

Neil hated to say that he was struggling, but he wouldn't be lying if he said it.

Herrera finally got him though. Checking Neil hard into the wall, and sending the ball up court to the strikers. Andrew's goal lit up red, but Andrew hadn't even moved to stop it. Neil could still see the slowly slipping smile on Andrew's face. And Neil remembered the number he'd chosen.

Two.

Moments later Wymack sent out his substitutions. And as Kevin passed Neil, he gave Neil a once over before saying the first words he had to Neil all week.

"Destroy him."

Neil knew Kevin meant Herrera, and never before had he agreed with Kevin so easily. Neil nodded and set his feet.

When the game started again, Allison did the same serve from earlier. And Neil and Dan were already up by their marks by the time Andrew cracked the ball up court. The ball hit the wall, and then the ceiling and then at a sharp angle it flew back down.

Herrera ended up getting it, and Neil smirked. Neil charged full body into Herrera, knocking Herrera into the wall.

Herrera glared.

But Neil sent the ball to Dan, ignoring Herrera's glare as the backliner stumbled to his feet. Dan lost the ball and it got sent back to Andrew's area. Matt caught it and passed it to Renee, Renee to Jean, and Jean passed it to Allison. Allison passed it to Andrew, and Andrew cleared the ball back up court to Dan. Dan made it four steps before passing it to Neil, and Neil caught it.

He sent up a mental curse when he realized he didn't have enough time to evade Herrera's attack. Neil popped the ball into the air and dropped down in the same motion. Herrera's fast and angry style was his downfall. And Herrera tripped, his foot catching on Neil's shoulder, over Neil and slammed head first into the wall.

Neil's shoulder burned with red hot pain. And he thanked God for the shoulder armor. Neil picked the ball up, ignoring the angry pounding on the wall where his team was, and sent it to Dan, and Dan scored.

Dan ran over and hugged Neil. And Neil tried not to tense. He failed.

"Sorry!" Dan says letting go quickly, "I keep... damn... sorry I keep forgetting. That was fucking awesome Neil! Don't do it again though, we can't have you benched with Seth."

Neil laughed, "I'm fine."

Dan rolled her eyes.

Herrera had to be replaced, and the Terrapins scored one more time before halftime. Again Neil watched as Andrew didn't even try. But he also watched as soon as the point was scored, Andrew twirled his racket once before shifting into a position that sent chills down Neil's spine.

The Terrapins began to fall apart. As soon as Andrew let by the second goal, he turned into a wall. The Terrapin strikers were throwing ball after ball at Andrew. And Andrew was clearing ball after ball right back.

When half time finally rolled around, Neil was at Andrew's side in seconds.

"You're amazing!" Neil said.

Andrew was silent, but he regarded Neil with a gaze.

"Shut up."

"I mean seriously everyone talked about you being this awesome goalkeeper, even Riko was ready to make me your pet to have you at Edgar Allan."

Andrew's eyes darkened at that, but Neil stopped him before he could say anything about it.

"But seriously I didn't think you would be that good," Neil said. "I'd never score in practice if you did that everyday."

Andrew was silent. And Neil wondered if he was speechless or something. But finally Andrew just looked away from Neil.

"Shut up."

Neil rolled his eyes. The rest of the team was too busy talking to notice Andrew and Neil, much less notice Andrew's hands. But Neil noticed.

"Are you going to be okay?" Neil asked Andrew. Andrew's hands were shaking.

Andrew regarded Neil with another look.

"You shouldn't kill yourself over a game." Neil said.

Andrew glared, " I *will* kill you if *you* start to give me that lecture."

Neil winced. Realizing how hypocritical it was for multiple reasons.

"How's your arm Neil," Matt asks from somewhere in the room.

Neil shrugs, " It's fine."

Kevin slammed against the locker door, interrupting Nicky's shout of triumph.

Kevin stalked over to Neil and Neil tensed.

"I swear to *god* Nate!" Kevin shouted. And Neil flinched at the name, but Kevin continued shouting, " Are you fucking stupid? Do you know how bad it would be if you played with a serious injury? You're no use to us on the court if you're too injured to play! Injuries aren't a fucking joke Nate! They aren't something to gloss over and ignore. If you get hurt you do something about it Nate—"

Kevin didn't make it through the third time saying Neil's old Nickname. Neil had slapped him hard across the face. Kevin stumbled.

"I thought I told you not to call me that anymore," Neil said. His hands shook by his side, and his voice sounded shaky. He looked at the floor, trying to think about how he had just slapped Kevin. He had done it before, normally when Kevin was being an ass to someone or when Kevin was thinking far too irrationally. None of them were ever hard, just startling. But this one had been hard, and it had been in defense of Neil himself. And everything inside Neil screamed it was wrong.

You either grow a spine or you don't.

"Neil- "

Kevin's face showed regret but Neil was thrumming with rage. His hands were shaking.

"Don't you dare," Neil's voice came out as a whisper, but it got louder, " Don't you dare! Kevin I've needed you all fucking week! I've needed my brother all fucking week. Riko pulled his shit and I got that you were mad! But I was hurt, and I was alone. And you chose to fucking ignore me. I'm on a new team, with new people, but I'm dealing with old shit. And you left me and ignored me all over some fucking argument. You didn't even try to talk to me. You don't get to say *shit* about my health right now. You don't *get* to start giving a damn about *this* . You don't get to pick and choose when you are there for me!"

"Neil-"

"No," Neil said. But Kevin was persistent and when Neil tried to turn Kevin grabbed his arm.

"Neil-"

Neil swung his arm out of Kevin's grasp and glared, "I said No Kevin," Neil said angrily, " Or are you like Riko and don't understand the meaning of the fucking word."

It was a low blow. And Kevin's eyes went wide. He took a couple steps back.

The room was silent.

"Did he just hit Kevin and not get the shit beaten out of him?" Matt asked in shock.

"Furthermore," Allison said, "Did he just stand up for himself."

Neil was breathing heavily. He felt awful. He needed to take it back.

"I'm so—"

Neil's eyes caught Andrew's, and Andrew quirked an eyebrow.

Neil swallowed back the apology. His mind halted and he stood up straighter.

"It needed to be said," Neil said.

"Well now I need to talk," Wymack cut in, "If we are done with your soap opera now."

Neil didn't respond, and Wymack began to talk. Moving quickly through what needed to be covered. Andrew stared at Neil. Andrew didn't seem to be paying attention, but Neil figured the guy was doing well enough on his own. But still Neil had to ask.

"Are you sure you can keep it down to two points?" Neil asked. Quiet so he didn't interrupt Wymack.

Andrew looked at Neil, "All that fawning over my skills and you still doubt me? For shame, roadrunner. For shame."

Neil smirked. Andrew goes to take a sip of his water

"Can't help it," Neil said, "Sometimes you seem too good to be true."

Andrew's water freezes right by his lips, and Neil watches as Andrew's lips turn up, ever so slightly.

"I know the feeling." Andrew says. Before drinking his water.

Neil didn't understand, so he shook his head and continued to listen to Wymack.

When they headed back out, Seth clapped him on the shoulder. "You're doing awesome!" Seth said with a smile. "You totally have to teach me how to drop a backliner like that!"

"No," Wymack cuts in, "He will not. Wesninski, get your ass on the court."

"Yes coach."

Neil stepped onto the court and the buzzer blared. And the foxes rallied.

Andrew blocked shot after shot on goal. Sending them down to where Neil stood. Neil scored a second time that game.

It was 2-3 foxes favor.

The foxes were exhausted. Even Neil was starting to feel the effects of the long game. And as the Terrapins charged the goal, Neil knew that if they entered overtime, the Terrapins would win. And as much faith as Neil had in Andrew, Neil didn't think even Andrew could stop the shot with how close the striker was.

Except he did. The striker had been aiming for the corner furthest from Andrew, but Andrew moved before the shot had even left the striker's net.

Andrew's racket hit the ground so hard Neil heard wood cracking, and the ball bounced off. And with a well timed check from Aaron, keeping the striker from trying again, Andrew was able to pick the ball up and clear it to the side.

Neil smiled wide, he'd already started moving before the game had ended. Neil was able to see Andrew swaying. The game had taken its toll.

Neil only hesitated slightly, clapping his hand on either of Andrew's shoulders as if congratulating about the same Neil said. "Yes or no," Andrew was barely standing, "We need to get you off the court."

Andrew nodded, his teeth gritted. And Neil shook him lightly as if emphasizing something. Neil pulled Andrew into a half hug, one that allowed Andrew to put his arm around him. The foxes did the rest. They brought the halftime celebration to Andrew and Neil, and the foxes all left the court together.

Once off the court and away from the eyes of spectators, Andrew leaned even more heavily onto Neil. The foxes had hugged the coach, giving an excuse of why they left before the post game handshake. And Neil and Andrew headed to the nurse's office. Once there, Andrew used shaking hands to upend Abby's bag and get his drugs out. He dropped the bottle, his breathing shaky. And finally Neil took the bottle and opened it, dropping one into Andrew's hand.

Andrew took it and then grabbed a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue into a white knuckled grip. He struggled with that too, so Neil undid the cap and handed it back.

"And you call me the tragedy," Neil says.

Andrew glares at Neil. But the glare isn't as effective when Andrew looks seconds from puking.

"How'd you know where to go?" Neil asked once Andrew's hands had stopped shaking. "To block the shot I mean."

Andrew shrugged," Coach said Watts takes his penalty shots in the bottom corner. Something like the game riding on you makes you take the most comfortable route."

Neil stared at Andrew in amazement. That had been said along with a slew of other stuff at halftime. Andrew had been staring at Neil. He hadn't been paying attention. Or so Neil thought.

"Do you have an eidetic memory?" Neil asked finally.

It had been a theory Riko had had years ago, but Neil hadn't believed it till now.

Andrew didn't answer, but his silence was enough.

Wymack came in at some point, telling Andrew and Neil to go shower and meet the others on the bus.

Neil felt relieved he hadn't had to deal with showering with the others yet, but he knew that was only a matter of time. Andrew and Neil kept their backs to each other as if a part of some unspoken agreement, and then they headed to the bus.

Neil sat next to Andrew again on the way back. Andrew just huffed out an exaggerated sigh.

"You know I'll throw you off this moving bus."

"I'll take you with me."

link to:

[Discord](#)

Chapter End Notes

I got a question last chapter about social media's I have. Really I most use discord. I run my server on there and that takes up alot of social media time. I do ping for updates on there and occasionally talk future ideas and chapters on there so here's that link:

<https://discord.gg/ebQ9kg5Q7r>

It's at the end of the chapter too

Chapter 21

On Monday Neil was doing his homework while sitting at the desk in the common room in his dorm. Neil was staring at a math problem and trying to decide if maybe he should go to Abby about getting glasses. He was starting to think all that time in the darkened Nest had ruined his eyes.

He was just about to give up and throw his notebook across the room when Seth came in and laid down on the couch. Neil figured he'd turn on the TV or something, but instead Seth began to speak. He was laid back on a pillow, feet propped at one arm of the couch. He was on his back and staring at the ceiling, and he had his hands folded on his chest.

"Being nice is hard," Seth said, "I really don't understand how Renee does it all the time."

Neil normally sat facing away from his desk while doing homework, that way his back was to a wall while he was concentrating. But the way he sat in relation to how Seth was laying down, made the entire moment feel like a shrink's office.

Neil wondered how bad someone's mental state had to be to come to him for mental health help.

"You don't have to be Renee," Neil points out, "You just have to stop being a dick whose goal is to hurt people."

"My goal is never to hurt someone."

"Friday." Neil responds, simply reminding Seth of his awful conversion therapy jab at Nicky.

"He was saying shit too," Seth tried to defend himself.

"You both made comments that were too far below the belt," Neil says. "Throwing brainwashing into someone's face like that was wrong."

Seth's face twisted, "Brainwashing?"

Neil flapped a hand about, "What do you think conversion therapy is?"

"Just a bunch of prayer and shit," Seth said. "I don't know. I've never thought about it."

"Some places have been known to use things as extreme as electroshock therapy, and corrective rape." Neil says.

Seth's eyes went wide, "Shit is that- "

Neil waved a hand, "I don't know, and you shouldn't ask. But even if those things didn't happen. Nicky's own parents sent him somewhere to get "healing" for something that he can't control or didn't need to be healed for. All conversion camps pretty much say the same thing the entire time. 'You're disgusting', 'you're a sin', 'you'll go to hell', 'God hates you', 'but he'll let you back eventually'. And they repeat that over and over again until you are 'cured'."

Seth is staring at the ceiling, "I don't even know where to start apologizing."

Neil shrugs, "Again. Stop doing shit like that. Maybe actually apologize to his face."

"He won't even stay in the same room as me," Seth said.

Neil rolled his eyes, then suddenly remembered how he still had to get clothes for the upcoming banquet.

"I can give you one outing with him to fix it," Neil says. "If you promise not to fuck it up."

Seth stared at Neil, "Dude you are my new religion."

"Your new religion says to get your head out of your ass and stop being a dick."

When Tuesday rolled around, Neil strolled up to Andrew's dorm. The dorm was really meant for four people, but the group stuffed in five.

Neil knocked, and Andrew answered bleary-eyed.

"Wesninski, do you know what time it is?" Andrew asked unamused.

"6 am," Neil responded easily, "Can you get Nicky? And Jean? I need to ask Jean to use his car. And I'm taking Nicky on an adventure."

"Is he going to die on this adventure?"

"Still undecided. But probably not."

Andrew stepped away from the door and strode back into the bedroom. Seconds later Jean was standing in front of Neil.

"Abram it's too fucking early. You may not sleep but others do," Jean said, annoyed.

"I need to get an outfit for the fall banquet," Neil said, "I need to use your car to go to the mall."

Jean blinked at Neil a few times, before nodding and handing over the keys. "Keep your phone on you."

"I don't have one."

Jean sighs and goes to reach for his own phone but Neil cuts in.

"I'm taking Nicky and Seth," Neil said, "So I should be okay."

Jean stared at Neil, now fully awake, "Those words were meant to calm me, but I feel more concerned then I was before."

"It will be fine," Neil responded.

Jean didn't get to continue because Nicky strode out, still half asleep and dressed but disheveled.

"I hope this is a good adventure," Nicky says.

Neil hands him the keys, "Go wait in the car I'll be right down."

Nicky shrugged and took the keys, shuffling to the stairs and out to the car. Neil nodded to Jean and smiled at Andrew, who promptly turned and went back to bed. Neil waited till that door was closed, to stride down the hall to the girl's dorm.

Renee and Dan were over in Neil's dorm, which meant Seth was with Allison. Neil knocked on the girl's dorm and waited. Soon enough Allison opened it, also blinking blearily.

"Wesninski do you ever fucking sleep?" Allison asked.

"I got an hour last night," Neil responds.

Allison rolled her eyes, "What do you need?"

"Seth is supposed to be coming to the mall with me," Neil said, "Could you go get him?"

Allison blinked a few times, "You're going to the mall?"

Neil shrugged, "I need to get some stuff for the fall banquet."

Allison blinks again. Then nods. She leaves the door open, much like Andrew had and wakes Seth who was on the couch... completely naked.

Seth springs up and walks over to the door, and Neil looks at the ceiling so he doesn't have to see Seth's dick in his peripheral vision.

"Seth clothes," Neil grits out.

"Oh right!" Seth responds. Neil heard Seth get ready, and then Neil hears a quiet conversation between Seth and Allison. He can't hear the words, but he can hear their quiet murmurs.

Eventually Seth heads out, fully dressed. But his hair looks like a mess. Neil doesn't bother telling him and walks with Seth to the car.

Nicky was on his phone, so he didn't notice Seth was with them until Neil began to drive away.

Nicky's gaze snapped from Neil to Seth and then back to Neil. He goes to speak, but Neil speaks first.

"Alright," Neil says, "Bottom line is that you two were both shitty to each other the other day. And Seth was shitty a while before that. We are going to have a good time today."

"Doubtful," Nicky grumbles.

Neil stops the car and turns around, "Nothing changes if you won't let it," Neil said pointing at Nicky.

The rest of the ride is awkward. To Seth's credit, he tries to make amends. But Nicky just ignored him the entire time.

They shop for a while. Neil enjoys the fact that there is still hardly anyone milling about. He finds an outfit quick enough. He tries it on and Nicky finally breaks his silence as he whistles.

"That looks awesome!" Nicky says, stepping around Neil in a circle.

Even Seth is excitedly staring at Neil, like a project in process.

"What if we curl his hair more and cut the sides," Seth said tapping Nicky's shoulder excitedly. Neil reluctantly allows the hands in his hair, sculpting it so some of it falls over his left eye.

Nicky's eyes brighten, "Is there a haircut place around here?"

Neil goes to speak and says he's fine, that he doesn't need a haircut. But then Seth is running off, and in seconds he's back. In his hands are a pair of suspenders.

Neil stares at them. "Why?"

"Because they'll look good now hush," Nicky said.

Neil felt like he was in the twilight zone. He'd had a plan to make Seth and Nicky cooperate and work together. But his plan had involved simply sticking them together. His second plan was locking them into a room together. He hadn't honestly thought either would work.

Seth helps Neil clip on the suspenders. And then he takes a step back. Nicky and Seth inspect him.

"I think he needs tighter pants," Seth says, "They'd look good on his ass."

Neil flushed, but Nicky's head shot up. Nicky stared at Seth for a moment, as if trying to see if Seth was fucking with him. Seth noticed.

"You can't tell me you haven't noticed that he has a nice ass, you're supposed to be the gay one." Seth says.

Neil's face was burning red.

Nicky looks at Seth in shock for a moment, before wandering off and grabbing Neil tighter pants.

Neil sighed when they were handed to him, and accepted that by inviting them he chose this fate. When he steps out, Nicky makes a choking noise.

"Shit Andrew's gonna kill me," Nicky said. Nicky walked around Neil, "Fuck! Neil, you have great legs."

"Dude we need shoes," Seth slaps Nicky's shoulder a few times.

"I have shoes," Neil responds.

"You can't wear doc martens to a banquet," Nicky responds.

"I don't see why I can't," Neil fires back," Riko's going to be there and I need my best ass kicking shoes on."

"Except you're not kicking any ass because Coach would actually kill you," Nicky said.

"I'm not hearing any reason as to why I wouldn't kick asses at the banquet." Neil responded.

Neil lost the argument and was led off to find shoes.

They talked Neil into a haircut. And then walked off, leaving Neil alone with the hairdresser. Neil watched them go, wondering if maybe he'd get lucky and they'd kill each other. When the haircut finished, he found the two of them on some benches outside. They were engaged in a conversation all on their own, and Neil sighed realizing there was no way he was getting out of any of this.

He approached and Seth handed Neil a box.

"Here's your new phone," Seth said, before handing Neil a bag," And all your clothes. Allison insisted that she pay for them. And she threatened to cut my dick off if we didn't get you a phone."

Neil stared at the stuff being handed to him, and didn't know what to say. It was strange having a team that looked out for him.

Nicky groaned, "Neil, don't look at us like that man! Why do you have to look at us like we aren't real when we are nice to you? Neil, it just makes me want to hug you."

Neil laughs, "Thank you," He says simply. He feels something shift inside of him, and he knows he won't ever let anything happen to his team. Nothing.

The moment ends when Seth gets distracted and speaks.

"Okay what about him?" Seth asks, pointing to a guy.

And Neil looks between the two of them.

Neither of them explain.

"Not gay," Nicky says. "Definitely straight."

"Nuh uh," Seth says, "I don't buy it. You can't be that good."

The guy they were staring at suddenly kisses a girl who he'd been walking with.

"I have an impeccable gaydar Seth," Nicky says, "It has never failed me."

"I'll trip you up somehow," Seth says.

"Impossible," Nicky responds.

Neil definitely feels like he entered the twilight zone.

On Wednesday Nicky drives Neil and Andrew to Betsy's. Andrew had taken Neil's phone at some point in the drive, and inputted all of the team's numbers. Plus Wymack, Abby, and Betsy.

Neil didn't even have the chance to close it before messages started flowing in. He rolled his eyes.

Dan

About time. Nvr thot u were going 2 get a phone.

Matt

Yes!!! Now I don't have to worry when you go off on your 3 am runs.

Neil didn't tell Matt that even when he had a phone he was still unlikely to use it. There seemed like no point.

Nicky

;)

Neil looked up just in time to see Andrew smack Nicky on the head.

"Don't text and drive Nicky," Andrew said.

Seth

Yo Bro, dunno if I gave u my # but just in case here u go.

Neil wondered why Dan and Seth couldn't seem to text like normal human beings.

Allison

Make sure you use this thing, Wesninski.

Neil rolled his eyes.

Renee

Heard you got a phone!!! Wonderful. Call me if you ever need anything.

And Neil couldn't even be slightly annoyed at Renee.

Aaron

Yo.

Jean

Make sure you actually charge your phone.

Kevin

We need to talk.

Neil shut his phone at that, if Kevin wanted to talk they could talk. But Neil refused to do it over text messages. Kevin could approach him in person if he wanted.

The session with Bee went much the same as last time. He didn't open up, but he didn't stay silent either. Andrew babbled on, cracking jokes and being his usual medicated self.

When they went to leave, Betsy caught Neil's shoulder. Neil surprised himself when he didn't flinch. He still tensed, but he didn't flinch.

"I heard you got a phone," Betsy smiled at Neil. "Do you need my number?"

"Andrew got it to me," Neil responds.

Betsy nodded, "Feel free to call if you really need someone to talk to, alright."

Neil's breath caught in his throat, but he nodded. Betsy's eyes were nothing but understanding.

"See you next week Neil!" Betsy waves. "Bye Andrew."

Andrew grins and waves back.

Kevin didn't make his move until Friday on the way back from their game. Neil had gone to sit with Andrew again. But Kevin had grabbed his arm and yanked Neil into the seat with himself and Jean. Neil had yelled before falling into the seat.

"Can we talk?" Kevin asked.

Neil glared. Kevin was never very tactful with how he chose to do things.

"I don't know," Neil says, "Can we Kevin? You're the one who's been avoiding me."

Kevin looks to Jean for help, but Jean is looking out the window pointedly. But Jean has a gentle grip on Neil, keeping the shorter from falling off their laps and onto the floor.

"I want to talk," Kevin says with a sigh.

"Do I have a choice?" Neil questioned.

Before Kevin could answer, both Andrew and Jean chimed in.

"Yes."

Kevin glared over his seat at Andrew. Though Neil was too short to see over the back of the seat.

"Stay out of it," Kevin snaps.

At that Andrew stood and hung over the back of the seat, poking Kevin roughly on the forehead.

"You stole my seat buddy Kevin," Andrew says, "And you did so without getting the decision cleared first. For shame."

"I'm only borrowing him," Kevin says back.

"Sorry you forgot your library card at home," Andrew responds, making a cutting gesture at his throat "No checkouts."

Kevin huffs, "Could you be any more insufferable?"

"Do you want to find out?" Andrew's grin is wide.

"Give me ten minutes," Kevin said.

Neil was unsure what to make of the exchange. He had been pretty sure that Andrew only tolerated his presence in his seat because Neil was insistent on sitting there.

You stole my seat buddy Kevin.

Neil was unsure what to make of it.

Andrew looked at Neil and Neil shrugged, as if to tell Andrew "what happens, happens". Andrew rolled his eyes, and then he turned to Kevin.

Andrew made a clicking clock noise with his mouth, and gestured back and forth with his finger. "Tick tock on the clock Kevin! I want Tweety-bird returned to shelves without any damages."

Neil expected Andrew to turn around and go back to his seat. But Andrew stayed standing, as if playing some psychotic version of moderator.

Kevin huffs and turns to Neil, but he seemed to accept that Andrew would be listening in. "I was wrong and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just ignored you and pushed you away like that. I just... I don't want it to be like Evermore here. I want us to all be safe. I can't handle seeing you go off and having the thought in my mind I may never get my brother back."

Neil softened but Andrew was still watching. Kevin cared, Neil knew he did. But Andrew apparently didn't.

"That's a piss poor apology Day," Andrew shook his head mockingly, "Tweety-bird protected you for years and made sure you were safe that night. And you repay him by ignoring him. I feel like your pathetic regret isn't quite enough here."

Jean snorted out a laugh. And it made Neil feel better.

"I was worried," Kevin fires back.

Andrew nods sagely, "Yes, I understand now. It must be that in the nest, worrying means you don't even check up on them once. Oh," Andrew slaps his hand to his forehead as if figuring something out, "It must also mean holding a high and mighty road of telling him not to get hurt. But constantly begging him to step into the line of fire for you. Kevin, Kevin, Kevin. It seems like not much has changed."

Kevin's face goes white as a sheet, "I- "

"Isn't the banquet tomorrow?" Andrew continues, "Where the three of you are going to see Riko again? Seems like good timing to make amends with your old savior. Is one shield not enough for you?"

Neil's chest tightens at the mention of Riko. And he sends Andrew a glare of that low blow. Andrew grins at Neil. But he backs off.

"It's not like that," Kevin says. "I know the timing seems weird but Neil I would never use you like that. I may be a coward, but you are still my brother. Neil, I swear it isn't like that."

Neil runs a hand through Kevin's hair to calm him, and Kevin relaxes.

"It's not," Neil agrees, before turning to Andrew. They both know I would have protected them anyways. They know I made a promise."

Andrew shoots Neil a calculating look. His hazel eyes boring into Neil and leaving Neil breathless. He was glad when Kevin finally decided to speak again. Forcing Neil to tear his gaze away from Andrew.

Kevin sighs, "It won't happen again," Kevin says. "I promise it won't."

Neil didn't know how to feel. But he knew he was tired of fighting with Kevin.

"I'm tired of this fight," Neil says, "I don't know about you never doing this again. That remains to be seen. But I'm tired of fighting."

Kevin sags like his strings had been cut. "So we're good?"

Neil nods. "For now."

Neil stands up and slides into the seat with Andrew. And Andrew finally plops down. Kicking the seat in front of him to piss off Kevin a bit more.

"Thought I annoyed the crap out of you." Neil said.

"You do."

"Thought you hated me."

"I do."

"You're odd," Neil says leaning back.

"You're one to talk."

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neil was going to sit by himself on the way to the banquet, he hadn't slept at all Friday night due to nerves. And he was feeling the effects of the two panic attacks he'd already had that morning. But as he saw Andrew staring out the window in his seat, his feet carried him to the back anyways. He slid into the seat and propped his forehead against the seat back in front of him.

"I don't think your species of bird is meant to be nocturnal Tweety-bird," Andrew said, "Maybe you should stop staying up all night."

Neil laughed slightly, but it came out exhausted and drained. He could feel the weight of the bags under his eyes. He couldn't find it in himself to come up with a comment, but Andrew didn't require one. Despite the manic smile on his face, Andrew made no more jokes.

"We have some time before we arrive," Andrew said looking out the window. "Sleep."

"Don't you remember what happened last time I fell asleep on you?" Neil asked tiredly. "Neither of us woke up having a good time."

Andrew's smile didn't waver, "I don't plan on falling asleep, so I'll be ready when you wake up swinging."

Neil tried to fight to stay awake, he really did. But the bus started to move and he nodded off slumping up against Andrew.

It felt like too soon that he was being woken up, Andrew knocked on the window, and Neil blinked blearily awake.

He shot up like he had been burned when he realized he had leaned against Andrew for the entire time, especially without Andrew's consent.

Andrew noticed the look in Neil's eye. But he didn't comment on that. Instead he inspected under Neil's eyes.

"Looking much better," Andrew commented.

Neil turned quickly when he felt his face flush at the comment. The rest of the team had already exited the bus.

Seth and Nicky were arguing. Not heatedly.

"I'm telling you he definitely is," Seth said. "There is no way he's not with how the two of them interact."

Nicky's face was twisted into amusement, but he was waving Seth off, "I'm telling you. I'd know if he was. He's my cousin."

"No way man. I bet that he is, and that *that's* a thing." Seth says.

Nicky waved his hand, "No way. How much."

"One hundred each bet," Seth responds.

"Suckers bet," Nicky responded, shrugging.

Neil didn't understand, and he honestly figured Seth and Nicky were being stupid. The other foxes were paying Seth and Nicky no mind either. All of them were grabbing their change of

nice clothes from the bus.

Neil spotted his bag and grabbed it, and only moments later he was grabbed by Allison. She didn't grab *him* but rather his shirt sleeve.

"Seth and Nicky said that we should put some makeup on your eyes," Allison said with a smile. "Meet me after getting dressed."

Neil nodded and headed inside, following the rest of the foxes. He changed slow, his internal hope was that if he moved slow enough he could just skip the whole banquet and hide in the stalls of the bathroom. He couldn't and soon enough he was meeting the girls. They put makeup under his eyes. And Allison brushed a finger over Neil's tattoo.

"I think I can cover it up with makeup," Allison said simply, "I've never really done it before, but I think I could do it with how small it is."

Neil opened his mouth to say no. He honestly did. But then he imagined how much it would throw Riko off.

"Do it." Neil nodded. And for the first time all day he felt a flash of power in him.

So what if covering the tattoo in a public setting made Riko mad. Neil didn't give a fuck.

Allison's grin grew wider and she worked studiously. Matt came in at some point to check on them, but when he saw what they were doing, something glimmered in Matt's eyes and he told them the foxes were waiting to walk in together.

Allison waved Matt off, and handed Dan a can of hairspray to work on Neil's hair.

"Can I do your nails Neil?" Renee asked, "It's a quick dry polish so it should be done before they finish."

"It'll piss Riko off," Neil smiled, earning him a slap on the shoulder from Allison for the sudden movement.

"Somehow I think that makes you want to do it more," Renee said, smirking.

"You know me so well," Neil said smiling again, much to Allison's displeasure. "Do you have silver and orange? Do my middle finger orange and the rest silver."

Dan sighed, "Are you really going to flip Riko off with our school colors?"

"Do you disapprove?" Neil asked.

Dan was silent. But when she moved past Neil to throw the hairspray into a bag, she was smiling.

Renee hadn't been kidding about the quick dry nail polish. The shit was dry in seconds. And Neil stared at his reflection in the mirror when the girls were done.

Neil had trouble seeing himself without seeing an all encompassing cloud of impurity and filth. But with the number gone he almost felt attractive. His breath was shaky.

"No crying," Allison said, "that makeup isn't waterproof."

Neil glared at Allison, "I wasn't going to cry!"

Allison smirked. The smirk fell though and she pulled Neil into a hug.

"God, you are awesome. I've owed you this hug, since you saved Seth, " Allison says," Now let's get out there and piss Riko off!"

Neil felt something twist in his chest as he hugged Allison back. Years ago he wanted this, the feeling of protection. The feeling of being safe. Now he wasn't even sure if he deserved it.

Soon enough Allison pulled Neil out to the foxes.

"It's about ti—"

Wymack cut himself off, "Jesus Christ. Just what I need. The biggest problem child I fucking have is going to be the fucking main attraction of the night."

Neil smirked and threw up his hands, flashing his two middle fingers with orange colored nails.

Wymack stared at Neil's nails and then turned to the girls, "You three are all signed up for a marathon when he inevitably pisses someone off with that."

"Do it anyway," Allison whispers," It'll be worth it."

Neil smirks, "I have their blessing coach."

Wymack throws his hands up, "Why do I even fucking try?" He mumbles to himself. "Go inside and I swear to GOD Wesninski if you start World War 3 I will bench you for the rest of the season!"

"Will there be a season if I start World War 3?"

"GO!"

Neil smirked and walked over to Andrew, Jean and Kevin who were closest to the doors. Andrew's eyes were trained on Neil's legs, and he was staring rather incessantly at the seat of Neil's pants.

Neil twisted around several times, trying to see what Andrew was staring at. When he looked up Jean was holding his head in his hand, and Kevin was staring at the ceiling in exhausted exasperation. Andrew was staring at Neil.

"What?" Neil asked, "Did I sit in something?"

Andrew stared at Neil. A manic smile on his face, "Stupidity."

Neil rolled his eyes and started for the door.

The foxes all followed. Neil opened the door, and it didn't take him long to find Riko. And when he did he froze. Across the table from the Ravens, orange and white streamers decorated the empty chairs. Neil's stomach bottomed out.

"Fuck," Dan said, "What do we do- NEIL!"

Neil was already striding forward. He didn't let his hands shake. He got to the table and pulled out the chair directly across from Riko. And he smirked.

Riko took one look at Neil's face and ground his teeth hard. His glare hardened. Neil sat up straight. Forcing the tremors to his hands under the table. Neil saw the foxes frozen in shock by the doorway still.

"You're missing something from your face Nate," Riko said.

Neil touched his face, acting confused, "Do I? Oh!" Neil mimicked Andrew's sarcastic head slap and snapped his fingers in Riko's direction. "You mean my atrocity of a tattoo!!! Yeah no I've been taking out the trash lately, and anything tied to you was the first to go. For now it's just make up, but I want to get it lasered off soon."

The foxes arrived at some point during Neil's mocking gestures, and they arranged themselves around Neil. Andrew sat right beside Neil. Nicky sat on Neil's other side. Kevin was on Andrew's other side, followed by Jean, Renee, and Aaron. Katelyn sat on the furthest chair that side. Nicky's date sat between Nicky and Seth, followed by Allison, Matt, and Dan on the end.

"I'd watch what you say," Riko said, "Wouldn't want a repeat of what happened after Kathy's show after all."

Neil flashed his middle fingers to Riko, and Riko clenched his teeth even harder. Neil's surprised they didn't break.

Riko went to speak again but Andrew cut him off.

"Reno!" Andrew said purposefully getting Riko's name wrong. Andrew paused and thought about it, tapping his chin. "No. No. No. That's not the right name."

"I think you're looking for the name 'Little bitch'," Neil supplied.

Andrew snapped, "That's it! Little Bitch, it's impolite not to talk to everyone at the table you know."

Riko's jaw clenched and his glare was ice as he looked at Neil.

Neil grinned, flashing his bright white teeth at Riko.

Neil heard the Ravens trying to antagonize the foxes, trying to tear them apart. But Neil stayed in his stare off with Riko. Finally Riko got a fierce grin onto his face.

Neil's smile disappeared, but he still held Riko with a fierce gaze. The foxes trailed off, as did the Ravens. The tension was too high for any of the other members of either team to feel comfortable. Neil however held his ground.

Riko spoke in Japanese, and Neil grit his teeth at the language. Whatever Riko said, would be understood by Kevin and Jean as well, *"You look good Nate. It's almost like you were never ruined at all."*

"Fuck you," Neil shot back.

"Don't be like that Nate," Riko said. A fake soft smile on his face. It reminded Neil of years ago, when Riko patched him up. It made Neil's stomach twist, that smile had been fake all along, he only wished he'd known sooner. Neil's hands clenched around the bottom of his chair.

"I said fuck you," Neil fired off again.

The smile on Riko's face made Neil feel sick. It made his insides churn and it made him remember the absolute pain he had in his chest when Riko had betrayed him. It reminded Neil of the let down, the disappointment. And that other emotion he was never able to truly name, but he'd hated it all the same.

"We both know you'll come crawling back Baby boy," Riko said. *"You need me."*

"I don't," Neil snapped.

"You're in love with me Nate," Riko said, "You'll come back. Just like you did in the nest. You were born to follow me, kneel for me. Be with me. No one could ever quite love you obviously. But at least I would tolerate you."

"Shut up!" Neil said in English finally.

The food arrived, but none of the foxes were moving, it was like they were all stuck. Unsure of what to do.

"He said shut up," Andrew says inspecting the dinner knife, "You should listen, Little Bitch."

"I am a fox," Neil said. "I'm not going back."

Andrew glanced at him. And Neil almost smiled. But then Riko spoke again.

"Would they still care if they knew how you got Jean and Kevin freed the first time?" Riko's words were in Japanese, but Kevin and Jean could understand what he said. Their heads snapped to Neil. And Neil clenched his jaw.

He'd wanted to take the secret to the grave, but he knew what Riko was doing. Riko was holding the little bit of power he could find over Neil's head, dangling it like he always had. Neil refused to let him have it. He braced himself for the foxes' disgust, for Andrew's disgust and spoke.

"Oh you mean the deal where I let Kengo fuck me in exchange for Kevin's and Jean's freedom from you? Yeah go ahead Riko, tell them. I'm so glad that your inferiority complex hasn't gotten any better, do you know how easy it is to insult you. You're just mad your daddy liked me better. He was fucking me in the ass, and he couldn't even look you in the eye without being disgusted. I wonder sometimes if you fucking my ass was your way of getting closer to him. Such a poor little boy full of Daddy issues, and a narcissistic complex that's a poor compensation for your tiny fucking dick. Oh I'm sorry. Did I take away the small little threat you had over me? Nevermind I don't care. Just shut the fuck up and leave us alone."

Neil heaved heavily. And out of the corner of his eye he could see Andrew and the foxes frozen. Their mouths hanging open in shock. Andrew's smile faded, his jaw clenched. His hand was tight around the knife.

The ravens were staring at Riko in open mouthed shock. And Neil's heart beat erratically. He stood up and stormed off. His skin crawled. He felt disgusting and dirty.

Neil finally made it to the bathroom. He went into a stall and pressed himself in between the toilet and the wall.

He was filthy.

You're in love with me Nate.

At least I would tolerate you.

He wasn't. Neil would know. Neil would-

Neil felt bile rise in his throat. And he clapped a hand over his mouth. He swallowed it back, and he pushed Riko's bullshit theory to the side.

It didn't do much to help. When that thought was gone, Neil was left with exhaustion. He felt how unclean he was. He felt like if he touched someone, he would corrupt them, ruin them. He was too tired to cry. Even though the tightness in his chest suggested that he wanted to. Instead he let out a shaky breath and pulled out his phone. He wanted to scratch his arms. But he was too tired. He wanted to die, but he couldn't be bothered to think of any way to do it.. He wanted to curl into a ball, but he only got one leg up before he grew too exhausted and let the other one rest on the floor. One arm helped support the knee he managed to bend to his chest. The other lay limp at his side. His head rested against the side of the toilet back, probably a filthy and disgusting surface.

He chuckled to himself, good, just like him then.

He looked at his phone. And remembered that Andrew had programmed Betsy into his phone. He couldn't call. He just didn't have the breath or energy. But maybe he could text. Maybe.

To Betsy

I feel like doing something really stupid right now.

Neil scoffed as soon as he sent the message. He didn't think a response would even come.

From Betsy

Are you alone right now?

To Betsy

Very.

There was a moment before a response came back.

From Betsy

Do you want to call?

To Betsy

Too much effort.

From Betsy

Aren't you at the banquet? Could you go be with your team?

To Betsy

I can't move.

From Betsy

Are you hurt?

Neil let out a loud laugh. It sounded broken and lonely. He knew he shouldn't say something so dark and twisted to a shrink. But he couldn't bring himself to care.

To Betsy

Not yet, haven't gotten that far in my plans yet.

From Betsy

Do you think I could call Andrew to be with you? You trust him.

To Betsy

He shouldn't be around me. He won't want to be.

Betsy didn't respond and Neil let the phone clatter to his side. It was another thirty minutes before he heard someone open the door to the bathroom.

Neil wondered if it was one of the Ravens. He didn't even feel a flash of fear over them finding him and hurting him. Neil instead just felt *nothing*. Neil shut his eyes, and he heard someone knock on the stall door.

"Not home," Neil said weakly, "Leave a message at the tone."

He heard a click and the door opened. Andrew stood on the other side, holding a credit card from his wallet.

Neil huffed out a laugh, but it was vacant. He was barely there.

"What a great skill," Neil said weakly, "Picking the bathroom door lock. Are we committing a crime of grand theft plumbing now?"

Andrew leans against the door's opening. Neil expected a joke but instead Andrew's jaw clenched.

"Lying against the toilet like that is filthy," Andrew said.

Neil laughed humorlessly, "Considering I am probably more disgusting than it is. I feel more bad for the toilet."

Andrew's medicine shouldn't have worn off already, but it's as if Neil's words cut through the very existence of the drug. Andrew's smile was gone.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked, holding out his hand.

Neil's stomach twisted.

"You shouldn't touch me."

"That's not an answer." Andrew said.

"I'll pass the filth to you ya know," Neil says.

Andrew freezes. Neil's surprised his teeth didn't break with how hard his jaw clenched. With one step Andrew was crouched down to Neil's level, he held Neil's chin in a firm grip. Neil averted his eyes.

"No you won't," Andrew said. His tone was dangerous. And the soreness twisted something in Neil's chest. "Yes or no? We are going to the bus."

"I'll contaminate you," Neil tried again. His voice was shaky. And Neil swallowed.

"Yes or no?"

"You aren't-"

"Yes or no?"

Neil shakily put up his hand, and Andrew stood hauling Neil to his feet.

"Can't you feel them on me?" Neil asked, "Can't you feel how disgusting I am?"

"No," Andrew responds, "I can't."

Andrew hauls Neil out to the bus, and pushes Neil up the steps. The foxes are all on board, and Wymack looks about ready to say something to Neil, but he stops when Andrew speaks.

"No," Andrew says.

Wymack's gaze shifted to Andrew, and then back to Neil's face.

"Is he hurt?" Wymack asked.

"Not physically," Andrew responds.

The foxes were silent. Most of them staring out their respective windows. It was dark out, but Neil could see that many of the foxes were sporting bruises. Seth's knuckles were bloodied and Nicky had a black eye. Neil looked down to Andrew's hands and saw he was also sporting a few bruised knuckles.

Kevin and Jean were the only two that looked unharmed, but Neil figured that was because Andrew had kept them out of whatever trouble the foxes had found themselves in.

Kevin looked ready to speak as Andrew pushed Neil back to their seat.

"If you speak right now Day," Andrew said, "I will cut out your tongue."

Kevin's gaze flicked to Neil's face and he finally relented, allowing Andrew and Neil to pass.

"What happened after I left?" Neil asked once the bus started moving.

"Riko called you a few choice words," Andrew said, "None of them took it too kindly."

Neil's hands shook.

"So they don't find me disgusting?" Neil asked. Quiet. Broken.

"Don't ask stupid questions?" Andrew leaned his head against the window and watched the scenery pass. And Neil looked down and Andrew's bruised knuckles that were tapping a rhythm out on his knee.

"Did we get disqualified because of it?" Neil asked.

A small bit of a smile crossed Andrew's face, "No junkie."

The drive back was silent. Abby made rounds to each fox. Checking their hands and injuries. She avoided Neil and Andrew though. Neil figured it was Andrew's doing.

When they finally got back. Neil walked slower than the other foxes. None of them tried to pull him into conversation, which he was grateful for. But still he was scared they hated him. He opened his dorm and startled when Seth stood on the other side. Neil waited to be cast out. But instead—

"Andrew told us all to leave it for tonight," Seth said. "Told us to forget we heard anything. But it didn't feel right. Man if you think for a second we believe any of the shit those Ravens say about you, then you're stupid."

Matt stood over his shoulder. Neither were boxing Neil in, he could pass if he needed to. But he found himself rooted to the spot.

"It's true though," Neil said. "I did make that deal."

"You did the best you could in helping your family," Matt corrected, "And you won't catch any of us thinking bad about you because of it."

Neil's knees felt weak with relief. His body sank to the floor. He didn't cry. But he leaned against the doorframe. The other foxes had all gone to bed. So Neil smiled tiredly relieved at Matt and Seth.

"Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Also I posted this on my Discord. But a quick Andrew Pov on the fight after Neil left.

Andrew watched as Neil got up and left. His jaw clenched and he almost went after the roadrunner, but he had to stay with Kevin and Jean. Neil would never forgive him if he left Kevin and Jean when Riko was around.

"Watch the little whore run," One of the raven backliners said.

"Excuse you?" Nicky said turning back from where he'd watched Neil run off. "I don't think I heard you right."

Seth was standing up as well, "Yeah I think you need to repeat that statement."

The backliner sneered, " Sure I will. Since your entire team seems like they have impaired hearing. Nate, is nothing but a little good for nothing, cocksucking-"

The man didn't get to finish, Nicky had lunged across the table at the backliner, his fist catching the backliner on the jaw. The backliner stood up and clocked Nicky. And then Seth was pinning him to the ground.

Andrew pushed Jean and Kevin away from the table just before the fight erupted into a free for all. He was going to stay out of it. He wasn't going to do a damned thing that might have got him in any trouble. But then Riko was grabbing him by the collar.

"How do you like my sloppy seconds Minyard? Have you tied him down yet, heard him scream?"

Andrew's smile was wide as he caught Riko across the face with his fist. His anger overpowering the drugs that were supposed to keep him calm and orderly.

He went to make sure Riko was down. That Riko would stay down. But he was being hauled back by Jean and Kevin.

Neil's people. His people.

The officials started shouting but the foxes weren't listening. They all were pissed and glaring at the Ravens across the way.

Then Andrew's phone chimed with a message from Bee.

Chapter 23

Neil remembered a lot of things he would rather forget. The night proceeding the banquet he remembered the worst ones.

The first time he woke up he woke up biting his hand to keep in a scream. His mind screamed to go check on Jean and Kevin as the events of his nightmare flashed through his mind. He gripped the bed hard. His breath ragged. Eventually after fifteen minutes, he got it to even out.

Normally he would leap out of bed and run to the court, and start playing until his mind couldn't catch up to him anymore. Or until he physically collapsed to the ground. But the events of the banquet and the attack he had himself from ensured that he was too exhausted to go anywhere except back to sleep.

He remembered too much sometimes.

They wanted him to beg. And Neil was tempted to. Icy water surrounded him as they held him down. He wasn't sure which sensation to focus on. The inability to breathe, or the pain shooting up his spine. His naked body was shivering and cold.

They pulled him up.

"Beg us Nathaniel."

"Please stop. Please. Please."

Neil awoke his breath coming out in a whine. But he could still feel the water. He could still hear the nest.

Neil practically fell out of his bunk with a loud thump. And he stumbled to the bathroom. He heard noises. He heard the Ravens.

"Say please."

Stop, please. No!

Neil made the mistake of looking at his reflection, he made the mistake of seeing what he was. He saw the bruises, he saw the spit, he saw everything else and he couldn't convince himself it wasn't actually there.

Filthy.

Neil punched the mirror hard. And he was gone.

"I think you should consider yourself lucky Nathaniel. I might actually make this good for you tonight."

"Stop it."

"Neil man? Are you— Fuck! Seth!"

"You are so pretty."

"No."

"You can't really think that will work, you didn't say please."

"Fuck you."

"Such a smart little mouth. Think you can use it on my dick."

"Fuck there is blood!"

"Don't touch him without his consent!"

"The bigger issue is him hurting himself!"

"I think you need a nice glass of water to calm you down."

"Get the hell off of me!"

"Neil, buddy. Neil, listen to me."

"Put him under."

"You all are sick!"

"And apparently you're enjoying that. Beg us Nathaniel."

"What's going on over here?"

"Jesus is that fucking blood?"

"Neil!"

"Stop it!"

"I think he needs to go under for another minute or so."

"No No no!"

"Hold him."

"Riko isn't here Neil! You're fine, you're okay."

"Another minute."

"Fuck you!"

"Nothing is working."

"Put him under again. I'll break you of this attitude Nathaniel. You know I will."

"No. No. No."

"Maybe pour water on him?"

"Dude no."

"I'm sorry I don't fucking know what I'm doing."

"Neil, come on back to us alright. You're alright hun. We have you."

"Again."

"No!"

"I texted Betsy. She basically said to try everything we already did. She said mints sometimes calm him down. Apparently Neil is still warming up to her so she can't help me more than that."

"Neil buddy calm down."

"Do we have mints?"

"I think in our dorm."

"Still fighting. Beg us Nate. Beg us to fuck you."

"I won't."

"Put him back under."

"Open his mouth."

Open his mouth.

"Fuck! He's fighting!"

"Just keep holding him so he doesn't hurt himself."

"Should we really be sticking something in his mouth while he panics?"

"Do you have another idea?"

"Beg us Nathaniel."

"Neil buddy come on."

"Beg."

"Neil, you're okay."

"Beg."

The scent and taste of mint was overpowering on Neil's tongue. He felt arms wrapped around his chest. His own arms were crossed underneath those and bloody. He was in a bathtub, and Allison sat in front of him. Her nails scratched along Neil's scalp.

"Hey Neil," Allison said softly, "You back with us?"

"Beg."

"Don't let go," Neil says. His voice is shaking. He feels as if he was standing at the edge of a cliff. The foxes were the only thing holding him from falling over.

Beg

"Don't let me go."

"Beg"

" *Please* don't let me go," Neil says. His entire body is trembling. The upperclassmen were frozen. But Neil feels arms wrap tighter around him.

"We got you bud," Matt says from behind him.

"Don't let me go."

Neil didn't know if he was asking in general, or for that moment. But all he knows is Allison reached forward and ran her hands through his hair. Her nails scratched at his scalp, causing Neil to relax ever so slightly.

"We have you," Allison says. "I promise you that we have you. And we aren't letting go."

"They made me beg. They made me say please. Don't let them have me."

"I will literally die for you." Seth responds earnestly. "They won't have you."

Neil shouldn't be asking. He knew that. He shouldn't delude himself into thinking he deserved any of what he was asking for.

"I'm going to move us to the couch," Matt said. "You'll be more comfortable there."

Neil shook as Matt's grip loosened on him. He was going to fall. He was going to fall. He was going-

Allison's hands carded through his hair. "We've got you. You just breathe. We've got you."

Neil let them situate him on the couch. He laid his head on Matt's chest. He could feel her heartbeat and her breathing and began to match it.

"That's it," Allison said, "Just follow Matt's breaths. You've got it. You're doing so well Neil."

Normally Neil would snap at her not to baby him. But he was too exhausted. And her talking to him was making him relax. He refused to admit it but the praise made it easier to breathe.

The rest of the upperclassmen situated themselves around the room. And Allison continued to card her hands through Neil's hair. Until finally he fell back asleep.

Neil awoke exhausted. His arms were sore. His head pounded. And his stomach churned. Voices came from the room he was in.

"Seth you have got to be kidding me," Dan's voice said, "You and Nicky go to the store unsupervised. I leave you for 45 minutes with Nicky. And the two of you buy fifteen grocery bags full of mints."

"If she doesn't like the mints, she's gonna go ballistic over the bottles of ginger ale we got," Nicky whispered to Seth.

"I'm more worried about the boxes of crackers," Seth whispers back. "Oh shit what about the 46 boxes of tea."

"Jesus fucking Chirst," Dan said. And Neil could imagine her rubbing her temples. "Is that a plant?" Dan asks. "Did you two get a fucking plant."

"It's a basil plant," Seth says defensively.

"And that helps how?"

"It's a part of the mint family." Seth said, "Do you know how many different types of mint there are?"

"For the love of god," Dan whispers.

Neil's stomach finally said it was time to get up and he lurched up, covering his mouth with his hand. There was a bucket suddenly in front of him, and he retched. He thought for a moment he might have pulled something but when he finally stopped vomiting he felt no pain. Only exhaustion.

"At least it wasn't on Matt this time," Seth says with a grin.

Neil holds his head. The events of the night prior rushed back. Him throwing up on Matt was probably why Matt was no longer on the couch.

"I threw up on you?" Neil asked Matt. His voice sounded completely wrecked.

"Yeah," Matt said, "It's no big deal. I changed my shirt but I did have to get up to do so."

Neil nodded.

Nicky sat by Neil's side and ran a comforting hand through Neil's hair. "Hey I heard you had a rough night last night. If it's any consolation, Andrew was up till 6 am trying to make sure Kevin didn't give himself alcohol poisoning."

"I thought he dropped the drinking habit when he left the nest," Neil said laying back down.

"Correction. He dropped it when you left the Nest." Dan said, " Though it seems he's struggling with staying on the wagon of sobriety."

Neil chuckles and holds up his bandaged arms and hands, " Guess I have no room to judge really. How bad are they? What did I use?"

"You broke the mirror, and used a piece of it." Renee says, " No stitches. But we should have Aaron take a look when he gets up. Abby and Wymack will be around at noon. They are bringing Betsy along."

Neil nodded again. Then he looked to the kitchen. The small dorm kitchen was literally crowded with grocery bags. And Seth was organizing bags of mints on the counter. There was an ungodly amount of mints and ginger ale on the counter.

And in the window, there was indeed a basil plant.

Neil blinked.

"Did you really buy a basil plant?" He asked.

"Yeah," Seth said simply.

"Why?"

"Because it's in the mint family and I didn't know what type of mint you liked so I got a lot of everything." Seth says, "I just put as much as I could into the cart before I got chased out of the aisle by the store manager. Then Nicky distracted him while I circled back."

Neil's thoughts were threatening to run away with him, but the upperclassmen didn't leave him alone long enough for them to be able to. They were there, but their presence wasn't overpowering. Renee kept Neil's hands busy. She did his nails, tiny intricate designs on each one. And she was careful of the bruises and cuts on Neil's knuckles. Though the girl had plenty of her own from the foxes' fight with the ravens.

Allison put in a movie at some point, while Seth and Nicky bantered in the kitchen about some guy from the store.

"There is no way that that guy could deadlift you!"

"He definitely could," was Nicky's indignant response. "You're just jealous that you wouldn't be able to."

"I could too!" Seth shouted.

"50 bucks says you're wrong!"

"Deal!"

Nicky got down on the floor and tensed his body. Dan meanwhile looked about ready to die.

"If you two fucking-"

It was too late. Seth attempted to lift Nicky and then stumbled, sending both of the boys knocking over the dishes that were on the counter.

"I swear to god," Dan mumbled, covering her face with her hand.

It was another hour till Aaron showed up in the open doorway, his eyes squinting and mouth open wide in a yawn.

"Nicky left a note on my face that said I needed to come give- "

Then he stopped and took in the state of the room.

The plates were still lying broken on the ground from when Seth tried to deadlift Nicky. The glass from the bathroom mirror still lay shattered in the bathroom and there was blood on the floor of the bathroom. Not to mention the mounds upon mounds of mints and stuff that Nicky and Seth got from the store. Then his eyes landed on Neil's bandaged arms.

"What the hell happened here?" Aaron asked.

The upperclassmen all turned to Neil, and Neil shrugged. "Panic attack."

Aaron blinked a couple times before striding over to Neil. "I'm guessing that it's your arms that need to be looked at?"

Neil nodded and allowed Aaron to unwrap Neil's arms. Aaron shucked in a breath when he saw.

"Shit," Aaron said.

"Oh god," Dan says nervously, " does he need stitches? God I knew—"

"No," Aaron responded, " No stitches. There are just a lot. Did someone take a hacksaw to your arm, Wesninski."

Neil just shrugged, " There's a reason why Wymack took my knives."

Aaron nodded. He began disinfecting and cleaning up Neil's arms. But he didn't finish before Andrew came in.

"Dan!" Andrew said, strolling into the room, "Why was I not invited to the party?"

"This is hardly something we planned for," Dan said, " But I'll be sure to invite you to our next crisis.

Aaron grimaced at his brother's entry. But he continued to clean Neil's newest cuts. Andrew hadn't looked at Neil yet.

Andrew's gaze fell on the bathroom. And he took a step towards it, turning on the light. There was a silence, and Neil could see how tense Andrew's shoulders became.

Then Andrew laughed.

"Looks like a little birdie needs a trip to Bee," Andrew said smiling.

"Andrew!" Nicky yelled at his cousin.

But Andrew shrugged and stepped over to where Neil was. He bent over the couch and looked at Neil's arms. His smile didn't fade, but Neil swore he could hear the smallest, sharp intake of breath.

"You know," Andrew said, "If you wanted to be cut up so bad, you could have just asked."

"And miss having all the satisfaction to myself," Neil grinned tiredly, "Not a chance."

Aaron finally got around to wrapping up Neil's arms. And he did so just in time for Wymack to walk through the door, trailed by Abby and Betsy.

"I just finished disinfecting and bandaging his arms," Aaron told Abby.

Wymack stares at Neil, "I thought I told Kevin and Jean to get rid of your sharp objects."

"I was redecorating and found a new one," Neil said.

"Neil here found the mirror to be especially offensive last night," Andrew said lazily. "See for yourself."

Wymack held their gazes for a moment longer before taking a step inside the bathroom.

Neil heard Wymack curse, and Betsy took that as her cue to shoo the foxes out of the room.

Wymack re-emerged and shot a look at Andrew who was still lying lazily on the couch.

"Out Minyard!" Wymack said.

Andrew pressed a finger to his chin, pretending to think about it.

"No I don't feel like it," Andrew said.

"Minyard—"

"Andrew actually sits in for sessions with Neil," Betsy says. "It makes Neil feel safer."

Wymack sighs, "You couldn't have chosen someone who wasn't also a problem child?"

"I didn't really have a lot of options," Neil said, "Andrew is the only one who could sit in therapy with me."

Wymack stared at Neil with a dumbfounded look before muttering, "I don't get paid enough."

Wymack strides out the door, likely to hear from the foxes what had happened last night.

Betsy turns to Neil, "I was worried about you last night," Betsy says, "Are you feeling better this morning?"

"I feel like shit," Neil says, "But at least I'm feeling... I guess."

Betsy nods, "I tend to have a love-hate relationship with feelings myself. They can be so good. But honestly sometimes they are just a bother. But I suppose we need them."

Neil shrugged.

"What happened last night?" Betsy asked. "I would think a banquet would be a happy affair."

"Saw someone I didn't want to see. And said things in front of the foxes I wasn't ready to say." Neil said.

"She knows about the Moriyamas," Andrew said, "And about Riko. Coach filled her in."

Neil tensed at Riko's name. But Betsy took it in stride.

"That's right," Betsy said, "You were originally a Raven. I bet seeing your old team was pretty stressful."

Neil let out a laugh, "Yeah I stress everytime I see them."

The conversation didn't take long to bore Andrew and it took an even shorter time for Andrew to pull the whole conversation off track. Which Neil was grateful for. Eventually Betsy got up and waved to Neil. And Neil tiredly sat back against the couch.

Andrew watched Neil, smiling lazily. "Why'd you have a personal vendetta against your mirror this morning?"

The room was quiet now. It was the most quiet it had been all day.

"I had a nightmare," Neil responded.

"Was it about a mirror?"

"No it was about the time I begged and said 'please'." Neil responded.

Andrew's smile fell just slightly, "Don't say that word. I dislike that word."

"What a coincidence," Neil said rolling his eyes, "Ever notice how I avoid it like the plague as well?"

Andrew glanced at Neil.

"They had filled a bathtub with ice water and were holding me down in it as they fucked me," Neil said, twisting his hands, "They said they would take me out of the water if I begged them for it. And the water was cold, and it went on for hours. So finally I cracked. When I looked in the mirror I saw... all of it."

He didn't have to elaborate with Andrew, because Andrew understood.

"Why do you hate the word please?" Neil asked.

"He said he would stop if I said it," Andrew said. But the words seemed wrong coming from smiling lips, "He didn't."

"At least you begged for it to stop," Neil said, "Meanwhile I begged for more."

Andrew didn't respond.

In the days that followed Neil found himself talking with the upperclassmen more. Jean and Kevin tended to laze around Neil doing homework. So Andrew's group was also around more by default. To Neil's surprise, he found out more about them. He had thought, wrongly, that he knew everything there was to know. But he had been surprised to find out that the girls had actually hated each other at the start.

The only reason they showed any camaraderie at all at the start, was because the foxes at the time had been vehemently opposed to the girls being on the team.

"I don't see why," Neil said shrugging when the girls mentioned the blatant sexism from before, "Renee can kick my ass everytime we spar. I see no reason why your gender should have mattered."

Allison hugs Neil from where she had been playing with his hair.

"Dan I want to keep him!" Allison says, "SETH WE ARE ADOPTING NEIL!!!"

"OKAY!" Seth calls back from the bedroom.

"NO!" Nicky's voice shouted, also from the bedroom. "ERIC AND I ALREADY HAVE THE PAPERS!"

"Well fuck all of you," Matt says, from the kitchen " Dan and I have already signed them."

Renee laughs. "I think Kevin and Thea signed Neil's papers a long time ago."

"I will literally take anyone other than Kevin," Neil throws in.

Kevin glances up from across the room, and simply says, "Fuck you Wesninski!"

Jean laughs.

"What about Andrew and You, Renee?" Nicky said smiling, "Aren't you going to try and adopt our precious boy."

Neil rolls his eyes.

"I'd rather throw him off a bridge," Andrew says, "Then there would be no orphan to adopt. Problem solved."

"Andrew's solution is still better than Kevin," Neil said.

"Fuck you Wesninski!"

Two weeks after the banquet, Seth got his stitches removed. He made a huge deal of striding onto the court shirtless to display his new battle wound.

"Still not attractive enough to be my type," Nicky shouted with a smile.

"Oh Fuck You Hemmick!" Seth shouted.

That same night, Seth came to Neil as Neil went to run to the court.

"Take me with you," Seth said.

Neil stared at Seth in shock, before checking the time on his phone.

"It's 3am," Neil says raising an eyebrow.

"And you practice at 3am all the time," Seth said, "I want you to teach me."

Seth stared at Neil in determination. And finally Neil relented. After all he had promised to teach Seth if the man had started being less of a dick. Seth was already delivering. It was Neil's turn.

Neil insisted on running to the court, much to Seth's displeasure. But Seth complained very little. Even when Neil corrected him on stances during the drills, Seth was patient and a good listener.

It wasn't as if it should have been shocking. Seth had been showing change and growth for weeks, even forming a friendship with Nicky in bets and pure dumbassery.

But Neil hadn't seen Seth on the court since the senior had been stabbed. And the court Seth from before had been volatile and uncooperative.

This one was different.

The next day was much the same, except Nicky decided to tag along.

Nicky was put through backliner drills, and Neil showed Nicky how to check. He pushed Nicky through cardio.

Nicky did complain during cardio.

But overall, Nicky and Seth slowly began to show promise. It made Neil's hope rise. Maybe they could do this.

Maybe they could beat the ravens.

Maybe Neil could *live*.

One day while he sat in the library doing homework, a shadow fell over him. Neil had jumped and turned around.

"I'm so sorry for startling you!" A girl said.

Neil stared at her for a moment before recognizing her as Katelyn. Then Neil's eyes shot to Aaron, who looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

Neil didn't understand why he'd come over if he didn't want to talk.

"You know," Neil said to Aaron, "If my presence bothers you... I was enjoying my studios staying out of your business well enough. Why'd you come over?"

"That was me," Katelyn waves happily. And Neil blinks confused, "I've seen you at games but I never introduced myself. I know all the other foxes, seems rude not to say hi to you."

Neil didn't know how to handle her completely polite and kind demeanor. Even the foxes were all rude enough to be familiar territory at times. Or in Renee's case, dangerous enough. Neil flicks his gaze to Aaron in shock.

"Is this a trap?" Neil asked, "There's no way someone this nice and happy exists."

"Renee exists," Aaron points out.

"She doesn't count." Neil said back.

Neil noticed Aaron's hand and how it was interlocked with Katelyn's.

"I thought you two weren't fucking," Neil says.

Katelyn flushes red. And Aaron stumbles for a moment.

In the end all Aaron can manage to get out is, "Andrew can't know. Tell him and I'll kill you."

Neil looks at Aaron in boredom, "Well now I want to tell him with that lovely promise of death."

"Is he okay?" Katelyn asks Aaron quietly.

"Not at all," Neil responds before Aaron does.

"Just don't tell him," Aaron tells Neil.

Neil shrugs, "Relax, I have no interest in your family drama at the moment. Though just know... sneaking around behind his back probably won't work. Can I go back to minding my own damn business now? Nice to meet you Katelyn by the way."

Aaron doesn't respond, but pulls Katelyn away in a hurry. Like Neil's a contagious disease. Neil wished he could pull him away from himself like that.

"Damn Neil," Nicky's voice startles Neil for the second time in too short a time span.

"If you are going to scare me," Neil grounds out, "At least make sure you kill me with a heart attack."

Nicky rolls his eyes. The foxes had seemingly gotten used to Neil's darker comments in the past few weeks. They thought it was his brand of dark humor that he used as coping.

No, he was just extremely blunt. But at least they weren't worried as much anymore.

Key word being *as much*.

Neil found that they had a newfound need to check up on him at least once everyday. He was pretty sure they had worked out a schedule for it, and probably named it.

Renee usually found him in the Cafeteria on Mondays. Dan flagged him down in the courtyard on Tuesdays. Matt usually popped his head into the dorm between classes on Wednesdays. Seth caught Neil in the math building on Thursdays. Allison normally waited for him after his last class on Fridays.

Andrew's group had their own schedule that seemed much more unbalanced and disjointed. Aaron stayed as far from Neil as possible. Kevin popped in when he wasn't distracted by Exy. Nicky took the majority of the shifts when Neil was in the library. Jean sat with Neil when he could in the Cafeteria. And Andrew popped up whenever he damn well pleased, and did so often.

Nicky set a coffee down on the table and pulled out a textbook, before setting to work. It was weird seeing Nicky so engrossed in what he was doing.

"Why does Aaron need to hide Katelyn from Andrew?" Neil asked.

Nicky got an amused quirk to his lips, "I thought you weren't going to meddle."

"Asking isn't the same as meddling. And I also said 'yet'." Neil said

Nicky sighed. "It's complicated. I honestly think it's because Andrew just doesn't want to see Aaron happy."

Neil furrows his brows. The evidence didn't back up that claim though. Not that Neil would have more than Nicky necessarily.

"How much do you know about Andrew and Aaron's pasts?" Nicky asked. "Andrew mentioned you said something about Riko researching us."

Neil winced, though he was glad Andrew had told the foxes. It was important information to pass along.

"It doesn't bother you I know?"

Nicky made an exasperated noise, "Kid you're killing me. No it doesn't. I kind of figure now we are all on equal footing, after all the shit you were practically forced to tell us."

Neil shrugged, "I know their mom gave them both up for adoption, but then she went and got Aaron back. I know she didn't tell Aaron about Andrew, and Aaron had to find out from Higgins that he had a brother. I think Aaron was being abused at home. I know Andrew went to juvy. I know your dad played a part in getting him put back with Tilda. And I know Aaron and his mother were in a car wreck."

"It wasn't Aaron who was in the car wreck," Nicky corrects, "It was Andrew."

"But the reports say—"

Nicky shakes his head, "They pulled their twin switch. Aaron didn't realize why until later."

"You think Andrew did it on purpose?"

Nicky shrugged but gestured for Neil to keep quiet, "I'm not sure. I don't want to think that of Andrew. I don't! There's a lot that could have happened. The evidence is really suspicious though.. But one thing is for sure, Aaron never forgave Andrew. He blames him."

The whole situation seemed odd to Neil. Andrew wouldn't have bothered with something so petty as killing his mother out of revenge towards his brother or the woman herself. Neil knew that. Andrew was still a mystery, he had many layers that Neil doubted he'd ever unravel. But Andrew always acted with reason. And pettiness was not enough of a reason for murder.

Neil didn't voice his thoughts, he allowed Nicky and himself to settle into a brief silence.

"I guess that's why I root for Renee and Andrew getting together," Nicky says. "I hope that Renee can at least calm Andrew down a bit. Though I can't say I'd approve, Renee's too good a person."

Neil shrugs. The idea of Renee and Andrew being together felt wrong, but for the different reason. And he wasn't ready to place that feeling under a microscope.

Nicky seemed to take Neil's silence as a cue to get back to work, and did so.

Chapter 24

Neil had been watching the calendar incessantly for the date of the Ravens match. His heart practically stalled in his chest when he learned it would be an away game. The idea of being in those locker rooms again, caused Neil's skin to crawl. He didn't think his anxiety over the day could get any worse. Then a week before the Raven match, it did.

Wymack practically stormed into the lounge, all the foxes were talking and laughing over something stupid that Seth had done. But they had all silenced at the look on Wymack's face.

"I want you to know that I didn't have a choice on this," Wymack said. And when his eyes met with Kevin, Jean, and Neil, Neil's stomach bottomed out.

He has to send us back.

This is it.

I have to say goodbye.

"Coach Moriyama has invited us to spend the night at Evermore Thursday night," Wymack says, "He brought it up in front of the entire ERC board as a sign of good faith from the Ravens after the fight at the fall banquet. The ERC is strongly insisting I accept as a sign of good faith in return."

The foxes were silent. You could probably hear a pin drop if one did so. Neil's mouth was dry. The idea of using one of the locker rooms had been bad enough. But the idea of the foxes sleeping in the rooms where he had been passed around and—

Neil put a hand over his mouth, feeling sick. And Jean and Kevin didn't look much better.

"Good faith my fucking ass!!!" Dan shouted, " We aren't doing it!!!"

"If the coach puts me in the same building as Riko overnight," Andrew says, " I could just end this whole problem here and now."

Andrew's voice was dangerous and he flipped his knife around in his hand as he said it.

"There will be no killing Minyard!" Wymack said.

"Nah. Actually," Seth says, " I am with Andrew on this one. Let's, like, castrate him and hang him from the ceiling as a message."

Wymack places a hand over his face and sighs. "I'm sorry, but after your fight at the banquet in front of the officials and other teams the ERC wants this to happen."

"The ERC can suck our dicks," Allison says.

Wymack's face twitches with the smallest of smiles. But it falls when Wymack sees Neil's face. "I'm sorry kid. I fought them for hours on this, but they won't budge."

Neil's hands shake. "It's fine," Neil says, " If we didn't go, Riko would have won. He wants me to be scared and run away. I won't. I refuse."

"Kid I can find a way where you Jean and Kevin are in a hotel room for the night," Wymack says.

"No," Neil's voice shakes, " We can all share one room at Evermore. Bring lots of pillows and blankets. And we'll stick together. It will be fine. The ravens can't do anything when all of us stick together."

Kevin and Jean look about two seconds from throwing up. And Neil actually gets up to do so. He moves as quick as he can without causing the foxes alarm, though a few tried to stop him anyway, and he makes his way into one of the stalls. He retches for what feels like forever. His entire frame filled with tremors. And he wills this week to pass as slow as it can.

The week flew. Neil tried to spend time savoring each individual moment. But soon enough he was sitting next to Andrew on the bus ride to Evermore. He'd expected the drive to be made in silence, figured the foxes would all be equally nervous. But Seth managed to derail the silence five minutes into the drive.

"Andrew!" Seth shouted to the back of the bus, he was hanging over the back of his seat and glancing back.

Andrew didn't react, choosing to ignore Seth entirely.

Seth was not deterred," Andrew! I need to ask you something."

Andrew let out a slow exhale of air and then turned and glared at Neil.

"Why are you mad at *me* ?" Neil asked incredulously.

"Because your influence has made them too brave. And I'm finding the new development irritating."

Neil tries to hide his grin and is unsuccessful.

"Hey Monster!" Allison calls out," Just answer him so he sits the fuck down."

Andrew stands and hangs off the back of Kevin and Jean's seat. His medicated smile hangs on his face.

"It's cute you think I care if he's standing. In fact, why doesn't Coach get us into a crash right now. I want to see if dumbasses can fly." Andrew responds.

"Come on man," Seth groans, "I just want to know if we are killing Riko tonight."

At this Andrew cocks his head to the side and glances at Neil.

"I plead the fifth," Andrew responds.

"Nah man," Seth says, "You've got to let me help."

"How would you be any help in a murder?" Nicky asks.

"I can hold him down while Andrew smothers him with a pillow," Seth says.

"That wouldn't look like enough of an accident," Neil adds in.

"Okay then we can stab him," Seth responds.

"Too messy," Andrew responds, "And the cops would know it was me."

"I mean in theory you could cut so it looked like a suicide attempt," Neil added in again. "But you'd have to stay there and fight him till he was asleep from blood loss, and it would be so much easier to fake suicide by gun."

"I know," Andrew said, slapping the side of his head and glancing at Aaron, "What about a car accident."

Aaron says nothing but his teeth clench hard.

"Oh!" Dan said, "I know how to cut brake lines."

"Why in the hell are you casually discussing murder plans on my bus?" Wymack said finally.

"Well if we had our suits and ties we could formally discuss it," Neil throws in.

"There will be NO murdering," Wymack says, "I can't believe I have to fucking stress that to any of you."

Wymack glances back, and then shakes his head and mumbles to himself, "No, of course I'd have to explain that to them. Why would I ever think anything less?"

Eventually around the three hour mark, the good mood faded and the team all sat in the uncomfortable silence that Neil had been expecting at first.

Arriving at Evermore was chaotic. As soon as they pulled into the parking lot there was press everywhere. Neil, Kevin, and Jean put on their press ready grins and hopped off the bus first. Cameras were immediately put in his face.

"Nathaniel, did you remove your tattoo?"

"No, it's just makeup for now. But eventually I'll be getting it removed," Neil says with a smirk. Every morning since the banquet Allison had helped him cover up his tattoo. Kevin had been clear he didn't think it was a good idea, but Neil had made *it* clear that he gave absolutely zero fucks.

"We heard about the fight at the fall banquet, care to elaborate?"

"Just a disagreement that went too far." Kevin responded, " We've worked it out now as you can see.

"Does this mean you three will be returning to Edgar Allan."

Kevin and Jean didn't respond. And Neil bristled a bit. But he grinned wide and looked straight at the camera.

"Only in Riko's wildest dreams."

They answer a few more questions before pushing past reporters. One reporter tried to stick a microphone in Andrew's face, but Andrew had just avoided her with practiced ease.

Eventually they made it past the reporters and up to where Tetsuji and the entire Ravens lineup stood.

Neil remembered standing there at times. Back straight, hands behind his back. Face straight ahead. Like a bastardized military lineup. It made the fox team look small.

Neil expected Tetsuji to speak to Kevin first, as that was the line up of authority. First Riko, then Kevin, then Neil, then Jean. But Tetsuji's calculating gaze landed on Neil. He beckoned Neil closer, and Neil heard Kevin and Jean take a sharp inhale of breath.

"Ever the trouble maker Nathaniel," Tetsuji says, " Why do you insist on causing problems."

Neil had knelt and called the man in front of him "master" his entire life. Fear had clouded every image of the coach in front of him. But now Neil had the foxes, and Tetsuji couldn't do shit to him as long as they were there.

"Sorry Tetsy," Neil said with a grin. Riko's eyes grew wide next to his Uncle. And Neil's grin grew wider, "You know it's 90% of my character. Coach Wymack does a great job reigning me in though. I really respect *him*. "

Wymack stepped up beside Neil, and promptly whacked him on the back of the head. It wasn't hard, but it got the message across.

Shut the fuck up.

Wymack redirected Coach Moriyama's attention. But Neil could see the set to Tetsuji's jaw.

"Are you suicidal!?" Kevin whispers.

Neil just looks at Kevin with his best, "How fucking stupid are you" look, and turns away.

"Even Riko is scared of The Master!!!"

"I'm not," Neil said, like a liar. He was terrified, but he wasn't going to play Riko's game anymore. And he wasn't about to call someone a Master when they hadn't earned anything from him in that regard. "And stop calling him 'The Master', he's not the center of your universe and you shouldn't allow him to delude you into thinking he is."

"It's not that simple—"

Kevin cuts himself off when Neil glares. The foxes are silent, watching carefully. Andrew stands to the side, unphased.

"Don't you dare tell me what is and isn't simple about this Kevin," Neil spits, "Don't you dare talk down to me like I don't understand."

Neil glares for a few more seconds, and Kevin shrinks shamefully under his gaze. Jean is staring at the building in genuine terror.

Neil places a hand on his shoulder in comfort, and then leads the foxes in following the Ravens down into the nest.

There were two sets of rooms in the nest. Home and Away. The side the Ravens normally stayed in was home. But Neil's stomach twisted when he realized that's where Riko was leading the foxes. Unconsciously Neil reached out and gripped hard to Matt's shirt in a white knuckled grip, he felt like he was going to fall with how bad his legs were shaking. And Neil refused to do so in front of Riko.

Matt said nothing, but wrapped an arm around Neil's shoulders, allowing Neil the excuse to lean on him even just a little.

The other Ravens pointed and laughed, and Neil felt how tense Matt was getting against him.

Kevin and Jean were sticking close to Andrew.

Renee, Seth, Allison, and Nicky were taking up the back, directly in front of Wymack. Aaron stood next to Abby. And Dan was on Neil's other side, a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll bet you're excited to see your old room Nate," Riko said smiling, "It's exactly how you left it. Coach Wymack will be in the center of the two dorm halls. That way he can help chaperone alongside our coach."

Riko finally got to the place where the hall split and he pointed to where Coach, and likely Abby, would be staying. Wymack and Abby nodded before heading to their room. Then Riko grinned at Neil, "See you at dinner Nate."

When the Ravens were finally out of sight, Neil's legs gave out. He breathed shakily. And the only thing that held him up was Matt's strong grip.

"Which room are we staying in?" Allison said. She had been the one who grabbed the keys.

Neil shakily stood and held out his hand for them and Allison handed them over. The problem with the rooms was this, the closest rooms to Wymack and Abby were also the "Perfect Court" dorms. Nate bit his lip, thinking.

"I need to see how bad it is first," Neil said shakily.

"How bad what is?" Seth asked.

"Riko said he kept Neil's room exactly as he left it," Kevin said.

There were no more questions. That was enough to answer all of them.

Neil grasped the key with shaking hands and walked over to his old room. He managed to get it open after a couple times and, after ensuring the foxes were unable to see in, Neil pushed it open.

Neil hadn't been entirely coherent when rushing from the room when the Ravens finally went to sleep, and he definitely didn't remember there being so much damage.

Desks and chairs were overturned. The bed was a bloody mess. The smell made Neil's stomach clench, and a familiar taste rose in his mouth. And from the headboard hung two sets of handcuffs still crusted in blood. Neil backed up a few steps and slapped a hand over his mouth, trying not to gag. He breathed a few times before stepping into the room and picking up various items and setting them back in their place. He managed to strip the bed and threw the sheets into his old hamper in the corner, before making the bed again with the second set. Jean's old bed was perfectly pristine. He sprayed some air freshener. And then he set to work putting the old first aid kit back together.

The foxes' curiosity finally won out, and they stepped into the room. Neil's quick cleaning did very little for the state of the room. But he had removed the worst bits.

"Are those handcuffs?" Dan asked, staring in horror.

Neil didn't respond, but just kept doing what he needed to.

"Neil we can stay in another room-"

Neil cut Allison off, "It won't matter. It's happened in every room enough times to make them all bad. At least there's things in here that are mine and not theirs."

"The handcuffs—"

"Are in every room," Neil responded tossing the First Aid kit into the closet with a crash. "If you guys can't be in this one tell me, but the room next door is Riko and Kevin's."

The foxes resolutely began spreading blankets over the ground. And Neil was happy that Riko had at least cleaned the carpet.

Kevin glanced at Neil though, "Can you take me over to my old room."

Neil didn't want to, but he also didn't want Kevin going alone. So Neil swallowed and gestured for Kevin to lead the way.

Kevin did so, and soon they were staring around the room. Kevin picked up one of his old history books, and pulled the letter from his mother out of the pages. The reason Kevin knew who his father was.

"Did you ever tell him?" Neil asked.

Kevin nodded, "I told him the day you dropped me off. He made the choice to not tell the team yet. He already told the school board, but we decided for his safety to not tell the world yet."

"Probably smart," Neil said. His gaze scanned the room until it fell on Riko's side. Most of Riko's stuff had been cleaned out, but a black photo album sat perfectly placed on the bed.

"Looks like Riko left something for you Neil," Andrew's voice from the door startled Neil. But Neil stepped towards the album on the bed, but to Neil's shock. It wasn't his name on the album. Internally it made sense to Neil. Riko had figured that the foxes would room two to a dorm. Riko probably figured that Kevin, Jean, and Neil would pick their old dorms. Logically that meant Kevin would be left without a buddy, while Neil had Jean. The most likely candidate to sleep with Kevin then was Andrew.

Andrew's name was emblazoned on the front of the album and Neil picked it up and handed it to him.

"It's not mine," Neil says, "It's for you."

Andrew glanced at Neil curiously and took the album. He opened it, read something. Then flipped the page. Andrew's jaw set, and the medicated smile disappeared fully. The binder got stuffed into Andrew's duffle bag in a few short moments. And then Andrew stalked out.

Kevin looked from Neil, to where Andrew had been, then back to Neil. Neil wondered what was in the binder, but he knew off of Andrew's expression that now wasn't the time to ask.

Once the foxes got settled they actually managed to make the dorm with so many bad memories feel like home. But Neil guessed that's because that's what the foxes were now, home. They managed to make time pass and fly by. Allison pulled out a bottle and they

played spin the bottle and never have I ever. Neil watched from the sidelines, and the foxes didn't try to make him play.

At one point the bottle chose Seth and Nicky.

"No way," Matt said. "20 bucks Seth takes the shot."

But Seth didn't. He kissed Nicky and then grinned. "Give me that 20 Matt!"

Nicky smacked his lips, "Yeah he can use it for kissing lessons or something."

"Fuck you Hemmick!"

20 minutes later the bottle chose Nicky and Matt. Matt kissed Nicky.

And Nicky grinned at Dan, "I might steal your man Dan."

"Hey!" Seth yelled. "No way that Matt's a better kisser than me!"

"No he definitely is," Nicky said sagely. "The expert has spoken."

Neil laughed at their antics, surprised by the fact that he had. He honestly didn't think the walls of that room had ever heard him laugh, or even seen him smile.

When it came time for dinner, Andrew finally came back, Renee trailing after him. Both of them were sporting new bruises on their skin.

Surprisingly, Andrew didn't go back to Kevin and Jean, but rather he stood with Neil. And Renee went to Kevin and Jean instead.

It made Neil pause. From what Neil had gathered so far, Andrew protected him yes. But Andrew normally let Neil walk by himself, and instead walked with Jean and Kevin. Neil knew Renee looked after the upperclassmen, but it looked like Kevin and Jean were being looked after by her now too.

Andrew may have noticed Neil's questioning glance, but he said nothing.

"Are you okay now?" Neil asked.

The medicated smile on Andrew's face had come back. But there was a tension in his shoulders, and a set to his jaw.

He gave Neil a singular look and then strode away towards where dinner was being held.

Stepping into the dining room had Neil tensed all over. Andrew's presence was steady by his side though. If not a little angry. Though Neil is pretty sure that was his natural setting.

Neil sat down, and the foxes followed suit. Andrew sat beside Neil and gripped the table harshly when Riko sat down on the other side.

Neil wondered if Andrew really would murder Riko or not. Not that he'd be opposed, but Neil wasn't sure how Ichirou would react to that. So Neil prayed that Andrew had enough self control to make it through the night.

Riko didn't speak, but he watched Neil with hungry eyes. Neil watched him right back with a pissed off glare.

Wymack came in, and went to sit with the foxes, but was dragged off to sit with Tetsuji.

Plates came out and the one placed in front of Neil made him blanch.

The chocolate on the cake was so rich that Neil could taste it. And Riko grinned.

Neil put his hands under the table, where they could shake as much as they damn well pleased. But his mind raced.

Neil recognized the look in Riko's eyes as a dare. Riko looked at him, as if already knowing what Neil would do.

Riko's power moves were getting old. He wanted to reassert that he'd broken Neil, by forcing Neil to admit that he couldn't do something. Neil's stomach twisted at the thought of eating the cake, but his anger soared at the thought of giving Riko what he wanted.

Andrew reached for the plate, probably to switch it out with his own. But Neil held the plate fast and took a bite.

The taste was not chocolate, but the taste that followed after he normally ate desert. Salty and bitter, and wrong. It made Neil clench his free hand under the table, nails digging into his palms as he swallowed.

Swallow Nate.

Neil's wrist was grabbed by Andrew. But Neil found he didn't mind. The grip was an anchor. Andrew was allowing Neil to fight his own fight, but Andrew wasn't letting Neil do it alone.

Neil managed to finish the cake, he swallowed the last bite, and ignored the twisting in his gut. He ignored the bitter taste on his tongue.

Riko's smile had turned into a hard set glare. And Neil allowed the little bit of victory that came with it.

Then Riko grinned, "Minyard did you enjoy my gift to you. I figured since you were taking all my things I'd give you a run down of their condition."

Andrew's grip on Neil's wrist loosened and he made to stand up, but Neil caught his shirt sleeve.

Andrew paused and sent a glare down at Neil. And Neil checked to see how far Nicky and Aaron were before switching to German.

"I don't know what Ichirou will do if you kill Riko here," Neil said, "He may decide to take me and place me where he needs me anyways, even if Riko is gone. He might change his mind about my chance."

Neil wasn't sure that it would work. And luckily it does. Apparently Andrew's desire to keep a promise out weighed his desire to hurt Riko.

Andrew's jaw relaxed, and he went back to sitting in moments. *"I can still maim him,"* Andrew says. But he's sitting again and so Neil relaxes.

"He doesn't need to look any uglier," Neil says in English.

Andrew huffs. And Neil considers it a win.

As soon as they leave the dining room, a mint is pressed into Neil's hand by Andrew. Neil unwraps it and sticks it in his mouth, allowing the minty flavour to chase away the bitterness on his tongue.

They get back to the room and Andrew grabs the binder he had stuffed into his duffle earlier. The other foxes watched hesitantly as Andrew moved. It was normally the time Andrew decided to come off his meds to crash for the night, and Andrew was already showing signs of not being in the best mood.

"Take me somewhere I can smoke," Andrew said to Neil.

Neil startled but grabbed the dorm keys and headed to the door. The foxes watched the two of them, but didn't move to stop either. They likely figured Andrew was enough of a deterrent against the Ravens all on his own.

The halls were empty of both Ravens and Foxes, and so it was easy to take Andrew through them and up to the court. When they got there, Neil led Andrew up to the stands and to the very top of the stadium, where a ladder accessed the catwalks on the ceiling of the court. They climbed it, Andrew moving much slower than Neil. Then Neil started to walk across the catwalk. Catwalk was the most appropriate term, though still not an accurate description. The walk was narrow, and one couldn't fit both feet right next to each other. Normally the technicians that went up there clipped themselves into the bar above it and then walked it. But Neil and Andrew didn't have harnesses so they would have to use good old fashioned balance.

Neil made it halfway across before looking back to see Andrew rooted in place. Andrew's glare was pointed directly at Neil.

"What?" Neil asked, "Are you coming?"

Andrew glanced at the bar and Neil could see the hesitation in his entire frame.

"Wait. Are you scared of heights?" Neil asked.

Andrew's glare snapped back up to Neil, "Shut up."

Neil frowned. He could see the restlessness in Andrew's fingers, saying that the blonde needed a smoke.

Neil walked back as quick as he could and turned his back to Andrew. "Climb on. I won't let you fall."

"That sounds like a great idea Wesninski," Andrew said, "Let's go ahead and both plummet to our deaths."

"I did something way more dangerous with Seth on my back at Palmetto. Have more faith in me."

"Have faith in the suicidal dumbass who risks his life daily?" Andrew asks.

Neil frowned and turned around. Meeting Andrew's gaze a fierceness burning in his own eyes.

"I may be suicidal," Neil said, "But I would never risk your life on purpose. I'd die before letting something happen to you."

Neil hadn't meant to say the words, but once they were out, he knew they were true. It was terrifying.

Something flickered in Andrew's gaze. And Andrew pulled his eyes away quickly. "Don't say that." Andrew said.

"I'm only telling the truth," Neil responded.

"I hate you." Andrew bit out.

But this time when Neil turned and offered his back, Andrew climbed on. Neil had to grip the bar above, so he had Andrew wrap his legs fully around his waist. The binder from earlier was pressed against Neil's chest and Andrew's arms were holding it in place.

When Neil started walking, Andrew's grip tightened, but Neil never faltered.

On the other side of the catwalk was the giant jumbotrons, and hidden from view in the midst of those was a maintenance door that Neil easily picked the lock on.

Inside that there was a room with wires and electric boxes, and a ladder that led to a hatch. Neil climbed up the ladder and out the hatch to the outside. Soon enough Andrew followed. As soon as they were on the roof, Andrew plopped down and lit up his cigarette.

Andrew's gaze fell back to the binder, his jaw clenching. And that's when Neil's patience finally snapped.

"What was inside?" Neil asked.

Andrew's gaze shifted to Neil's and his jaw clenched harder before relaxing.

"Something that shouldn't exist." Andrew responded.

Neil's curiosity wasn't sated by that, and so he asked again.

"Riko mentioned it was because you kept taking his things, and that it was a rundown on one's condition." Neil said, "I'm assuming he means Jean, Kevin, and I. So which one of us is in the binder?"

"Smarter than he looks," Andrew said.

Neil reached for it but Andrew slapped his hand down onto it. Keeping Neil from dragging it away.

"It's you," Andrew responds before looking at the sky, "It's pictures. And Riko included 'care instructions'."

Neil's hand froze, and then he reached for the binder again.

"Don't," Andrew said.

"But I need-"

"No you don't," Andrew responded.

There was an edge to his voice. One that left no tone for argument.

Neil finally relented with a sigh. "Can you at least tell me how bad they were?"

Andrew blew a cloud of smoke up into the sky.

"Awful," Andrew responded dully.

Neil's eyes fell downward. Andrew was never going to unsee those images. He'd remember them with perfect clarity for the rest of his life.

"I'm sorry," Neil said, "You're never going to be able to get it out of your head now."

Andrew didn't respond, but he pointed to Neil's hand. Neil gave it to him, unhesitating. Andrew's hand grabbed Neil's and he ran his thumb over the awful scars from the handcuffs.

The touch filled Neil with *something* . And Neil pushed the feeling away, marking it down as distracting.

Andrew dropped Neil's hand and finally spoke.

"No I guess I won't," Andrew responded. And Neil had to take a moment to remember what he was responding to.

When he did, Neil chuckled dryly.

"I guess you'll see me pretty differently now, huh?"

Disgusting.

"No," Andrew responded, "I still hate you. You're still stupid. And you're still annoying."

Neil couldn't help but grin.

Chapter 25

Neil and Andrew only stayed on the roof another 30 minutes before turning to go back inside.

Neil made it halfway down the ladder before realizing that Andrew hadn't moved. Neil waited only a couple seconds before re-ascending to see what had gone wrong.

Andrew was ripping up pages of the binder and slowly adding them to a small fire. Neil said nothing as Andrew looked ten seconds from snapping as he ripped up the pages. But with every page burned, Andrew slowly relaxed. With the last page burned he finally pulled out the letter. He gripped it harshly before shredding it and adding it to the fire too. Andrew checked the binder one more time to ensure it was empty, before tossing it like a Frisbee over the side of the stadium. Neil heard a car alarm go off.

"I think you just hit Riko's car," Neil said.

Andrew smirked slightly, and Neil smiled, "Good." Andrew responded.

Neil and Andrew went back to the room in silence.

The next morning the foxes started to wake one by one. Neil had climbed into Jean's old bed with Kevin and Jean. His back to them and watching the door. He had tried to sleep closest to the door. But the foxes had all glared at him until Andrew pushed him towards the bed. Matt, Seth, Andrew, and Renee had slept closest to the door. Dan slept behind them alongside Allison and Nicky. And Aaron slept on the floor next to Jean's bed. Neil had just woken up, he blinked sleepily at Dan and Matt's smiles. Renee and Seth were awake and discussing something quietly. Neil felt himself grow relaxed in the presence of his teammates and he fell back asleep.

A vicious pounding on the door woke him alongside the words, "JEAN! NATHANIEL! YOU'RE LATE FOR PRACTICE AND RIKO'S LOOKING FOR YOU!!!"

Neil's mind fractured, and he sprang out of bed, tripping over various things on the floor. He heard Jean leaping from the bed as well. Kevin was running to the door and Neil jumped in front of him as Kevin pushed it open.

Reacher and Johnson stood in the door. And Neil was suddenly brought out of his panic by someone... two someones standing in front of him.

Renee and Andrew had sprung in front of Neil as the door opened. Andrew was glaring and Renee's face wasn't Renee's. The two backliners stepped back, having not expected to find all the foxes in one room. They'd probably had plans to hurt one or both Jean and Neil once the door opened.

Neil took a few steps back at that thought. Dan's hand settled on his shoulder as she stormed past. Her anger on a different level of what Neil had ever seen. He was reminded all over again why she was captain.

Andrew and Renee stepped aside easily for Dan to step into the doorway, but *both* of them stayed close with a watchful eye on the two backliners.

"Excuse me!" Dan snaps out, "I will wake *my* team for *my* practice all on *my* own! You have no right to come pounding on the door at ass-o'clock in the morning and waking them up in a panic. *They* aren't late for practice, because *they* don't attend *your* practices. Leave!"

Dan slams the door in their shocked faces before turning back to the room, "I'm pretty sure there are some breakfast places in the area, why don't we wake coach and see if we can go to one. I'd rather not eat a meal with the ravens again if I can help it."

The room agrees readily, and Neil is snapped out of his stunned silence.

They hadn't even hesitated in stepping between him and the Ravens. And Neil was stunned into silence because of their actions. No one had stood between him and danger since his mother, he'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be protected.

The day passed, the foxes went out for breakfast. And they all made the unspoken decision to stay away from Evermore for the day. They had spent their night in the dorms under the stadium, and that was good enough for everyone.

Jean, Kevin, and Neil instead took the foxes to the mall they used to frequent when at Evermore. Neil had been about to wander off by himself and check out the Exy store, Excites, but he was halted in his progress by a hand grabbing his hood.

"Don't you think it's a bad idea to wander off alone in Raven territory Tweety-bird?" Andrew's voice said.

Neil tilted his head back. They were on stairs, with Andrew a few steps up, so Andrew was higher up than him.

"Probably," Neil said.

"Then stay close," Andrew said, "Stop making my job harder."

"I warned you this would be a challenge," Neil said, "Is it becoming too much for you now?"

Andrew just stared at Neil, his meds in full swing. "I want to throw you off a roof sometimes."

"Do it," Neil challenges, "I'll take you with me."

Andrew let's go of Neil's hood and gestures for Neil to lead the way. Kevin and Jean had the same idea as Neil and together the three of them made a beeline to the Exy store.

Somehow Neil ended up looking at the Goalie section. Andrew standing over his shoulder.

"You aren't a Goalie Tweety-bird," Andrew says. "Wrong section."

"Technically I'm a hybrid player. I've just never played Goalie with the armour." Neil responds.

Neil picks up the armor he was looking at and frowns, "It's so bulky."

Andrew rolls his eyes. "Are you just now noticing that? I thought you were slightly more—"

Andrew cuts himself off, and Neil stares at him in expectation.

"Slightly more what?" Neil finally asks.

"I was going to say I thought you were slightly more observant, but the amount of shit that flies over your head is almost comical." Andrew says.

Neil frowns at the armor he held in his hands.

"What do I miss?" Neil asks. "I don't feel like I'm missing anything. Do I have something on my face?"

"Stupidity," Andrew responds.

When they finally headed back to the stadium, there were massive hoards of people all over the place. Neil could see the ones who only watched the games with perfect court members, because they had posters and numbers of all four Court members' faces.

Neil was disturbed to learn that now he had cardboard cutouts of his own face staring back at him.

"Someone needs to burn all of them," Neil said, "Like right now."

The foxes got changed out. And headed to their positions on the sidelines.

"We are sending Renee out first," Wymack says, "As per Andrew's own request."

The foxes murmured to each other curiously. But Neil was stuck reading the line-up. The moment he saw it, he knew something was wrong.

"This isn't right," Neil said confused, "They've put Thompson as a striker alongside Riko. He's a backliner and not to mention a freshman."

Neil didn't throw in the word ruthless, but he wouldn't have been wrong. Neil had been tasked with breaking Thompson of his anger and tendency to pull illegal checks when Thompson first was set to join the Ravens' lineup. The backliner pulled far too many illegal maneuvers in highschool, almost getting thrown from the team for being red-carded every game he got to play. Neil had sent Thompson through drill after drill as punishment, but none of them ever dulled the backliners ruthlessness. Eventually Riko had come up with a different plan, one that still involved Neil. Only this time Neil was the reward, not the punishment.

The foxes gazed confused at Neil for a second before checking their own packets.

Neil gazed at the packet for a bit longer. "I don't like this coach," Neil said.

"Noted," Wymack said, "But seeing as I can't just prance over there and demand they change it. Your opinion is dismissed."

Neil sighed. A bad feeling churning in his gut.

"I'll be starting with Kevin and Neil today as strikers. Seeing as they're ex-ravens it makes sense to start them against the Raven backliners. Seth you watch and figure things out, and when you feel like you've got a handle on the movements you let me know. That being said, figure it out before Kevin dies of exhaustion on my court."

Neil waited for Seth to protest that he should start, but Seth didn't. "Got it." Seth said. Seth gave Neil a smile, "Get us to 7 points before I step out there."

"I feel like you are grossly overestimating my capabilities," Neil said.

"Shut up and let me speak," Wymack said, "Allison is our starting dealer. Jean and Matt, you two are starting backliners. Dan is going to lead you all through warm-ups. I know the Ravens have made us all mad, and they definitely deserve one hell of a beating. But you keep your noses clean, or at least try your best. I can't afford to lose any of you on the court because you decided to haul off and punch someone."

Neil looked over to Andrew who was smiling maniacally at everything. Andrew made no comment, and so Neil turned back to Wymack.

Wymack glanced around. "What are you all still sitting here for? Get moving!"

The foxes cleared out and warmed up. Neil felt his uneasiness grow as the Ravens halted in their warm-ups to watch theirs. But he bit back his discomfort.

Soon enough Neil and Kevin were waiting for the buzzer. Both of them were buzzing with nervous energy. The buzzer went off and the game began.

First serve had gone to the Ravens. And Neil had almost forgotten how fast the passes were on the Ravens team. Jean was the only one who managed to catch up to where the ball was. He checked Riko hard, sending Riko sprawling. But the ball had already gone to Thompson. Thomson took a few steps and shot on goal. Renee cleared it with her Racket and sent it to Allison.

Allison picked it up and dealt it up the court to Neil and Kevin. Neil caught it. A shadow passed over Neil, and Neil barely had time to send it to Kevin off the wall before Reacher slammed into him. Neil hit the ground with enough momentum to roll and slide. He got up quickly, watching as Johnson stick checked Kevin and stole the ball. Neil flew across the court, checking Johnson with his body and sending the backliner sprawling. Reacher was too close to Kevin so Neil took ten steps and sent the ball to Allison. Allison sent the ball flying back up to Neil, and Neil managed to score, moments before getting hit by Reacher.

Neil breathed heavily as he got off the ground. That play alone had been exhausting. His body ached already, but the Foxes had taken the first point of the game.

Neil could see how much Riko was seething at the other end of the court. Riko turned to Thompson and shouted in Japanese, "Do it."

Neil and Kevin both stiffened. Something wasn't right. Something was terribly wrong.

It was only six minutes into the match. The ball was served and Riko got it. The ravens passed around the foxes like they were children. It felt like some messed up game of monkey in the middle. One with checking and fights.

Thompson ended up with the ball, he took his steps and shot on goal. Renee moved to block it. And she was going to, but Thompson didn't stop. He ran full throttle into Renee checking her hard. The crowd went silent as Renee's body hit the ground. Her head had collided with the wall, and she had hit the ground hard. Not only that, but after she hit the ground she hadn't been moving. But Thompson was, he moved to grab the foxes' downed goalie.

Neil was the first tGoalie. The Fox backliners were still staring in shock. But Neil was down the court in a flash. He slammed Thompson up against the wall and then shoved him so hard Thompson went sprawling. Neil moved towards Renee, Allison was already there. Trying to remove Renee's helmet. Neil grabbed her arm when he smelled blood.

"Don't!" Neil said urgently. "It could be the only thing keeping pressure!"

Neil felt rage simmering under his skin as Renee lay there, unconscious and limp. The girl could pin him in seconds when they spared, but she hadn't been prepared for such an illegal move mid-game.

Neil's teeth clenched, and he turned to see Thompson smiling. Neil saw red. He lunged forward at the backliner, and he would have gotten there. But Matt and Dan were holding him in a strong grip. Neil fought and clawed until the refs threatened him with a yellow card.

"You'd better get him the hell off this court!" Neil shouted pointing at Thompson.

Kevin appeared in front of Neil.

"Calm the FUCK down!" Kevin said. "If you keep this up they'll give you a red card."

"It'll be worth it!" Neil snarled.

The medics put Renee onto a stretcher and Andrew stepped out onto the court. Neil began to fight to get free again. But Andrew grabbed the back of his armor.

"Calm down little birdie," Andrew said. Andrew's voice sounded dangerous. And Neil could tell that Andrew was just as pissed off as he was. "Get back to your position."

Andrew shoved Neil towards the striker's starting position. Neil stumbled, but he listened and stalked back to his place.

Thompson was awarded with a red card and sent back to his place.

As good as Andrew was in goal, the sheer number of shots taken, and the medicine that Andrew still had coursing through his system caused the score to be 7-3 Ravens favor by halftime.

Neil's body ached all over. His shoulder was definitely going to need ice by the end of the day. But Neil's mind was on the lack of a certain Goalie.

He had been expecting to see Renee in the locker room with Abby come halftime, but Renee wasn't there.

"They rushed her to the hospital," Wymack said, "She wasn't responding to any attempts to wake her. And her head was bleeding. Abby went with her, so try not to let yourselves get injured right now."

Neil grit his teeth, his fists clenched.

"I harbor no illusions that we are going to win this game," Wymack said honestly, "I think we've all realized that by now. That being said, get out there and make them sorry they decided to fuck with you. Play for Renee, but most importantly, play for yourselves."

Wymack spoke about a few more pieces of information. But it was obvious none of the foxes were listening to it.

They filtered back onto the court. And they played the best game that they could.

But in the end they still lost.

13-5

Neil fell to his knees painfully when the game ended. His body was screaming with pain. Kevin was in no better shape. Seth made his way onto the court, and despite being tired himself, allowed Kevin and Neil to lean on him as they walked off the court.

Andrew had only let in 13 goals of 150. But the strikers hadn't been able to deliver.

Riko appeared in front of them, and the entire team stiffened as the Raven's captain stepped in front of them in the hall.

"You see?" Riko said looking at Neil, "You have no hope of ever winning this. You'll come back to me one way or another Nate, and when you do. Kevin and Jean will come crawling back too."

Kevin and Jean stood to the side. And Andrew appeared beside them.

"I'd rather die," Neil said, "Then go back to any place that has you in it. I'm a fox. That won't change, I don't care what happens."

Kevin and Jean stared at Neil in shock. Neil walked over to Andrew, and allowed the Goalie to lean on him. The two passed Riko and went to where Coach had Andrew's meds.

The foxes showered quickly. Dan and Allison handled press. And Neil sat with Andrew until the drugs kicked in, then the two of them went to the showers and did the routine they normally did after Andrew played a full game.

They showered with their backs to one another. Neither turning to look. And both trusting the other not to.

The foxes loaded up on the bus silently. They were too worried about Renee to talk.

Neil floated between worried for Renee, and silent acceptance. He felt like some part of himself had allowed him to start believing that they might win Championships. Neil wasn't overly concerned with living. But the idea of finally living outside the nest had been a dream he wanted to shoot for. The game had been proof of how unlikely it was that Neil would ever attain it. But what he'd told Riko had been the truth.

I'd rather die.

When they got to the hospital. Abby greeted them with a tired smile.

"They are finishing up," Abby said tiredly. "She's fine, but she's going to be out for a while. Broken collarbone, concussion, some broken ribs. Right now it's a minimum of 10 weeks out of the game."

"That's fine," Neil said, interrupting whatever the foxes might have been about to say, "Can we see her?"

"Doctors are releasing her into my care in a bit," Abby smiled.

"Ten weeks!?" Dan said in shock, "There is no way Andrew can keep up doing full games for that long!"

Andrew was smiling, "Oh ye of little faith Dan," Andrew said.

But Neil knew Dan was right. Andrew couldn't stand without help at the end of these long games. There was no way that Andrew could keep it up for ten weeks. But then again, maybe Andrew didn't have to—

"I can play," Neil said.

Kevin's eyes widened in realization, "That's right you can! But you've never played in all that armor!"

The foxes exchanged confused glances. And Neil heard Jean quietly explaining Riko's old goal punishment. But Neil was focused on Andrew.

"You can teach me," Neil said pointing at Andrew. "I'll just be a sub. Someone there in case something happens. But it's better to have a sub like me than no one at all."

Wymack looked like he was still trying to catch up to the conversation. He turned to Kevin and started to argue with the striker. But Neil was focused on Andrew.

Andrew gave Neil a look, and then, "Sometimes it's really hard to believe someone like you exists." Andrew says finally.

Neil shrugs, "Look who's talking."

Neil didn't think they had a chance in hell against the Ravens. He didn't believe for a second that they would win Championships. But he would be damned if he let Riko plow over him without a fight.

If he went down, Riko was going down with him.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

5416 words. Pls enjoy UwU

Andrew and Wymack took Neil to the court the next day. Renee tagged along her arm in a sling and various other medical wrappings on her. Kevin and Jean too their own car.

Andrew changed out pretty quickly, but Neil was busy staring at the armor. He was trying to decide which parts of it he could forego.

"You have to wear all of it," Andrew says. His first dose of the day was starting to kick in, but Andrew wasn't quite high as a kite yet.

"If I wear all of it, I'll look like a toddler when trying to walk!" Neil responds.

"You already act like a toddler 90% of the time, just put on the gear." Andrew says back.

Neil frowns and throws on the armor while grumbling under his breath. Andrew watches, unimpressed with Neil's childishness.

When they leave the locker room. Neil stumbles a few times due to the gear. And when they finally get on the court he notices that all the foxes had shown up.

"I look like the Michelin Tire man," Neil says, annoyed.

"No, you look like a toddler throwing a tantrum." Andrew responds.

Neil ignored him and walked to goal. He turned once he got there and waited.

Then Andrew appears, "You're forgetting something."

Neil looks around, unsure of what he might be forgetting.

"It's something I hold in my hands every game," Andrew hinted.

Neil glanced around again, "I don't know," he finally said shrugging, "The other team's hearts?"

Andrew is silent. His helmet is off, so Neil can see the slight clench to his jaw. Annoyance, maybe internal rage and questioning life's choices?

"Wesninski. The racket." Andrew finally says.

"Oh. I don't need one."

"Yes you do. Take the racket."

Andrew hands over his racket. And Neil stares at it. "What am I going to do with this?"

Andrew doesn't respond to him, but he turns to Kevin and Seth.

"Open fire," Andrew says before stepping off to the side.

Neil smirked at Kevin, who was first up. And then Kevin fired. The ball rocketed towards the lower corner. So Neil brought his foot back and kicked it.

Renee began to laugh, she clutched at her side as giggles erupted from her mouth. Kevin and Jean just held the faces of two men who had been suffering far longer than anyone else. Seth was busy watching how far Neil had managed to clear it. The rest of the foxes were doing something similar.

"You were right," Neil said to Andrew, " That was a lot easier with padding."

Andrew didn't respond, but his lips were slightly parted in what would be the Andrew Minyard equivalent of a jaw drop.

"You did that without padding!?" Matt said, "How the fuck did you not get a broken foot."

"He did," Kevin responded irritated, " He did get a broken foot."

"Riko wasn't expecting it though," Neil grinned, " It was a great day."

"You were stripped naked to your underwear and got a broken foot," Jean supplied.

"And I proved Riko wrong, which equals a great day."

"Dude can I just say you have a really low bar for great days," Seth said.

"I've been told," Neil responded.

"Wesninski," Wymack finally jumps in, " Don't use your feet unless necessary. You have a racket for a reason."

Neil frowns. Then readies himself for the next shot. Seth shoots it high so Neil does what his instincts said, and he heads in like a soccer ball. Neil grits his teeth at the slight reverb in his helmet.

Renee giggles again. Kevin looks at the ceiling as if he's praying. And Jean is laughing at the faces of the other foxes.

"There's no way he was stupid enough to do that without a helmet," Allison threw in.

Jean and Kevin were silent.

"You're fucking with us," Dan said, "He didn't."

"He only did it once," Kevin said, "If that's any consolation."

That apparently wasn't any consolation at all based on the horrified expressions.

"Wesninski," Wymack said, "I can't believe I am about to fucking say this. But don't use your fucking head!"

"At least now I know who dropped you on your head as a child," Andrew said, "Apparently it was yourself."

"So what am I supposed to use then?" Neil asked incredulously. "I'm not allowed to use my feet, I'm not allowed to use my head. Next you'll tell me I can't use my neck!"

"DON'T USE YOUR FUCKING NECK!!!" Wymack shouts. Before mumbling to himself, "Jesus Christ this kid needs therapy."

"What am I supposed to use then!?" Neil asked.

Andrew doesn't respond, but takes a step forward and grabs the racket.

"Use. The. Damn. Racket." Andrew said slowly. "I hold it for a reason."

Neil huffs and readies himself again. When Kevin takes a shot, Neil swings the racket and clears it.

"Oh hey! that is a lot easier!" Neil says.

"I need alcohol for this," Wymack says.

After they finish practice, Neil somehow gets roped into going with Andrew's group to the store. He was just going to run back. But Kevin and Jean corralled Neil into Jean's car. Andrew was in the backseat, his meds in full swing.

Neil expected them to pull off right away, but Nicky was distracted. Seth had stopped Nicky outside and started up a conversation.

Nicky was gesturing excitedly as he spoke to Seth, and Seth was smiling right back. Seth said something and Nicky's eyes went wide in excitement. Then Nicky said something, but paused. Nicky's gaze shifted over to Andrew and Nicky deflated. Nicky said something, gestures much more subdued, and Seth frowned and said something back. Nicky shrugged. And Neil watched as Seth patted Nicky on the shoulder, saying something that made Nicky smile the slightest bit. Then the two parted.

Neil looked over at Andrew who had watched the entire exchange. Andrew looked at Neil.

"I didn't realize they were such good friends now," Andrew said, "I wonder how that happened."

Neil shrugged. Honestly he wasn't sure either. He had just planned for the two to cooperate for once and respect each other. He hadn't expected them to talk nearly everyday. He wondered how Andrew hadn't noticed till now, until he recalled that Andrew really wasn't around for a good chunk of the more brotherly moments.

"Does it matter?" Neil asked, Jean began to pull the car out of its spot, "The two of them cooperate better on the court now, and I don't know if you've realized it, but Nicky is smiling much more now."

"Nicky is always smiling," Andrew shoots back.

"You know for someone who wears a fake smile 90% of the time, you'd think you'd be able to recognize one when you see it." Neil says.

Andrew stares at Neil for a moment. Then his eyes get drawn to the scenery and the conversation ends.

When they finally get to the store. Nicky gets out of the car and claps his hands excitedly. Though Neil can see the forced smile and happy act. Neil points and stares at Andrew.

"I think it would be pretty obvious," Neil says.

Andrew's mouth sets under his smile, a sign of visible frustration.

"Shut up," Andrew says.

Neil shrugs.

The store they went to was a Halloween store. Neil grimaced at the various costumes, and Nicky laughed.

"You're going to have to pick one out Neil," Nicky says, "You're coming with us to Columbia for the Halloween party, and they give free shots to those who are in costume."

Neil pauses, "Since when am I going to Columbia?" It came out harsher than he meant it to, and he watches as Nicky deflates.

"Well... I uh... I mean you don't have to... but it would be nice if you did... someone other than Aaron and Andrew to party with for once." Nicky's face was crestfallen.

Neil huffed out a laugh, "I'm not much of a partier. I'm not really sure I know how. Besides I'm pretty sure Seth is trying to pull me into doing something stupid that night. Why don't you guys just stay back?"

Nicky sighs, "We always go to the Halloween party at Eden's. Though it might be fun to get the whole team out. But that's never going to happen."

Andrew and Aaron were off with Jean and Kevin looking at Halloween decorations in another part of the store. He suddenly recalled the moment between Nicky and Seth outside the court.

"What were you and Seth talking about back at the court anyways?" Neil asked.

"Oh!" Nicky says, "He was making sure I was alright. He kinda... walked out on me sobbing like a child last night after I got off the phone with Eric."

"Did something happen between you two?" Neil asked worriedly. Eric was Nicky's lifeline. If something happened, Nicky didn't have much of a way to stay afloat. Neil could see it in

Nicky's fake smiles and forced demeanor.

"Oh God no," Nicky said, "Eric is great! I've just been having a tough time being so far from him. And Andrew and Aaron are... Andrew and Aaron. And Kevin and Jean are just a tiny bit put off by me... And with how the twins are about socializing... I don't know, I guess I get lonely sometimes. And last night, saying goodnight to Eric and having to hang up a phone instead of crawling into bed with him... It was just painful."

Neil felt like he understood. Nicky was miles away from the first person to tell him he was worth something. A person who made him feel happy. And instead now, Nicky was with two emotionally constipated twins who didn't know how to handle Nicky at all.

"Seth helped though?" Neil asked.

Nicky let out a laugh, "Yeah, so I was sobbing like a baby and Seth comes over and sits next to me. I lay my head on his shoulder, and he starts telling me the stupidest story. Apparently one time he strapped himself to the roof of his friend's car and they drove 60 miles an hour down a highway with Seth strapped in like a Christmas tree."

"That sounds like something Seth would do," Neil said honestly.

"It sounds like something you would do." Nicky responded.

Neil frowned, "I'd rather stand in front of the car."

Nicky snorted and focused back on his costume selection. At some point the rest of their group walked over and joined them.

"Neil, you need to pick out a costume," Kevin said.

Neil rolled his eyes, "I need to ask Andrew something first."

Andrew glances at Neil, and Neil takes it as his cue to start. "Would you be open to having the rest of the team join?"

Nicky freezes in picking out his costume. And Aaron glares at Neil. Andrew just stares at Neil, his smile still in place.

"You've gotten brave little bird," Andrew responds. "All grown up and asking for things you can't have."

"I can have this," Neil fires back.

"No," Aaron says, "You can't."

Neil sends Aaron an unimpressed look before turning back to Andrew.

"And more importantly Nicky can have this. I know you *know* better than anyone that he *didn't have* to uproot his life in Germany to come here. And he could have left when you and Aaron finished High School, but he didn't. And I think it's pretty obvious that he wants to socialize and make friends." Neil said, "You have to stop breaking the team in half. You've got to start giving an inch."

"Give them an inch and they'll take a mile," Aaron snapped, "Nicky doesn't need them. He has us."

"Really?" Neil asked, glancing between the twins, "Because '*Us*' wasn't the one who comforted Nicky in the hall last night."

Aaron glared at Neil, but Neil could see a flash of confusion on his face. It was clear Aaron missed the fakeness of Nicky's smile too.

Andrew however stared at Nicky silently. He was thinking about it for sure.

"Make a deal with me then," Neil said, stepping forward.

Andrew's full attention was on Neil in a flash.

"One night with the upperclassmen in Columbia, and in exchange I'll let you pick out what I wear." Neil said, "Not to mention the fact that one night truly pales in comparison to the years Nicky has spent taking care of you."

"I'm going to make sure you *hate* whatever I make you wear, Wesninski," Andrew responded.

Neil grinned, "I'm counting on it Minyard."

Andrew didn't let Neil see what he had gotten but Nicky gave a loud laugh when he saw it. It was disconcerting.

When they got back, they went back to the cousin's dorm. Neil plopped down next to Jean and Kevin as the two began playing Exy videos. Though when Andrew plopped down in the window, Neil found that he gravitated over there.

"Can I have one?" Neil asked as Andrew pulled out a cigarette.

Andrew raised an eyebrow, "I didn't know you smoke."

Neil shrugged, "I don't."

Andrew hands Neil a cigarette, and Nicky stands excitedly from his beanbag.

"I'm going to tell the others that they are coming with us to Columbia on Friday." Nicky says.

Andrew waves him off, and Neil takes a drag. He turns to Andrew after exhaling out the window.

"These will kill me faster right?" Neil asks honestly.

Andrew stares at him for a moment, "Are you just hellbent on making my life more difficult?"

"You're the one who gave it to me," Neil responds.

A sharp knock on the door interrupts their conversation. Kevin, Jean, and Aaron look at Andrew. And it wasn't Neil's dorm, so Neil looked at Andrew as well. Andrew stubs out his cigarette and walks over to the door. And Neil perches himself on the windowsill and pulls out his phone.

The window screen had been removed, likely so Andrew could smoke indoors. So Neil's one leg dangled out the window, and he bent his other one to sit on the windowsill.

Neil went through his text messages, but was brought out of his thoughts by the doorknob creaking. Neil glanced up at the door and rose an eyebrow.

"Oh I must be imagining things, Pig Higgins. You are a *very* long way from home." Andrew said.

"Andrew," Higgins said, " We need to talk."

Neil was so focused on what was going on, that his phone slipped right off his lap and out the window. Neil scrambled to catch it. But he watched in dismay as it fell into the bushes.

Neil glanced at the door, which was blocked by Higgins and Andrew. And then he glanced at the window, which was only a four story drop, and decided on what to do.

Neil ducked his head out the window and placed both feet on the windowsill. It made a creaking noise, and through the glass Neil could see Kevin turn and look at him.

Kevin stared for a full three seconds, giving Neil time to jump down so his hands were grabbing the windowsill and he was dangling.

"NEIL!" Kevin shouted.

Neil pulled up so his head peaked over. "What?"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!?" Kevin asked.

Neil looked down to where he had dropped his phone. "I dropped my phone."

Andrew hadn't turned around yet, but Neil could tell that Andrew was listening to what was going on behind him. Neil couldn't see Higgins. But Higgins had stopped talking.

"Then use the fucking door!" Kevin said.

"This is faster," Neil responded.

He didn't say "and deadlier" but Andrew had abandoned the door and turned around to see what Neil was doing.

Neil looked down, aiming to land in the bushes. The thought that they might not be enough to break his fall didn't phase him at all. But as he let go of the sill, strong hands grabbed his shirt and hauled him back in. Neil looked up at Andrew, and swore that for a moment Andrew's eyebrow twitched.

Andrew grabbed Neil's shirt and dragged him out the door and down the hall. The foxes all watched in silence as Neil was dragged down the hall. Andrew made it to the elevator and pushed the button. Higgins made it just in time to ride with them.

"Andrew-"

Andrew cut Higgins off with, "Wait."

And when the elevator dinged, Andrew dragged Neil off and outside to where Neil had dropped his phone.

Andrew's manic smile was in place as he pushed Neil towards the bushes. "Go fetch."

Neil glared, "My way would have been quicker."

Andrew kicks Neil on the ass, "I said go fetch."

Neil glares, but listens. Searching the bushes for his phone.

"Andrew, I think I've got the right guy now, but none of the kids are talking to me, they don't trust me that much." Higgins said.

Neil searched around the edge of the bushes, looking for his phone.

"Kids?" Andrew asked. His tone was dangerous enough that Neil paused, "You only mentioned one kid last time. How many kids has she had?"

Neil continued to search for his phone.

"You wouldn't care about the number unless there was something there," Higgins said, "All I need is a 'yes or no', and then I'll be gone. I promise."

Neil finally found his phone and then he stared up at the wall. He placed his foot on the first dorm window sill he could find, and then he caught the top of the window and pulled himself up.

Andrew's back was turned to Neil. And Higgins was busy staring at Andrew.

"You promise." Andrew let out a maniacal laugh. "You'll break that promise inside a week, Pig. Don't pretend otherwise. Do I have to walk you out to make sure you leave or will you ___"

"Andrew," Higgins sounded slightly concerned. "Your friend is scaling the building."

Neil had made it up to the second story window. He looked down, and Andrew slowly turned around. Andrew's eyes started down where Neil *had* been looking for his phone, and tracked up to where Neil was *now*. Neil waved and turned back around to leap for the third story window. He missed and fell, having to catch himself quickly on the ledge of the second window.

Neil didn't notice Andrew climbing up on the ledge of the first window. But he felt a yank on his leg before he fell into Andrew's arms, and then he was thrown over Andrew's shoulder in a fireman's carry. Andrew strode back over to Higgins and dropped Neil to the ground. With one foot Andrew stepped lightly on the middle of Neil's back to keep Neil down.

"Andrew just a yes or no," Higgins said.

"Pig—"

"Drake," Higgins said. And Andrew's foot was off Neil's back. Neil turned to see Andrew's jaw clenched.

"How many kids Pig?" Andrew ground out.

"Six since you," Higgins responded.

Neil was watching Andrew though. Andrew's face was all tense. The smile slipped from his face. Neil stood up and made to walk someplace he wouldn't hear, but Andrew grabbed him.

"You don't want me knowing this yet," Neil said in German. Neil refused to be the first one of the two of them to break a boundary.

Andrew's jaw clenched again. "Stay." Andrew says.

And so Neil does. Andrew turns towards Higgins again. "Yes."

"Andrew—"

"You promised me you'd leave once you had an answer Pig," Andrew said, a smile slipping slowly back into place, "Don't turn yourself into a liar now."

Higgins looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead he nodded and walked off.

Neil sits down on the curb, and Andrew sits down next to him.

Andrew's jaw was still clenched, and Neil felt as if he had an answer that he hadn't paid for. Andrew began to light a cigarette.

"Ask me about Kengo," Neil says.

Andrew pauses and he glances at Neil.

"I thought Kengo was off limits." Andrew said.

Neil shrugged, "So was Drake."

Andrew huffed, "What made you think of going to Kengo with that kind of deal? How'd you know he'd accept?"

Neil held out his hand for a cigarette, and Andrew gave him the one that he'd just lit, before lighting his own.

"When I was young, my mother tried to take me and run from my fate at Evermore. We got caught when I turned six. At six years old my father brought me in front of Kengo as proof that he hadn't lost his son, the Moriyama's future investment. Kengo took a liking to me and asked my father if he could have a night with me before I was sent to Evermore. He was my... first." Neil says the words detached. And he doesn't look at Andrew as he says them. "He tried to be gentle at least... I guess. As far as—"

"Stop it," Andrew says, "Don't do that."

Neil looks at Andrew, "Don't do what?"

"Say that it could have been worse," Andrew said, "You know as well as I do that it doesn't matter how much it hurts. It still wasn't good."

Neil doesn't know what to say to that. So he just says, "Thank you."

Andrew stares at Neil a moment, before flicking his cigarette butt at Neil, "Don't look at me like that."

Neil was confused, and wanted to ask what Andrew meant. But Andrew was already heading inside.

Eleven people along on Friday, meant that Andrew had to call ahead and make a reservation at Sweetie's, the foxes stuffed themselves into the booth. And the night began.

Seth and Nicky managed to carry the whole conversation. Aaron ignored everyone. And Neil was able to goad Jean into being more social. Andrew was still riding through his withdrawal, post playing a full game. And when the napkins full of cracker dust arrived, Andrew was shakily taking some.

After Andrew stopped shaking, he finally handed Neil his costume. Everyone else was wearing theirs, but Andrew had told Neil to wait until they got there. Renee and Allison got up as well, pulling Neil into the family bathroom.

"People will probably think we're about to have a threesome," Allison said laughing.

Neil frowned, not knowing what that was. But before he could ask Allison turned around and closed her eyes. Renee followed suit. Neil frowned for a moment, even more confused. And then he realized they were turning away so he could change.

Neil's face went red as he pulled out the outfit. "Oh my God these shorts are short."

Renee giggled, and Allison cackled.

"Why are these socks so long?" Neil asks. "What are these tiny belts? Why do they have clips?"

The girls were cracking up against the wall. Neither of them turned to look.

"Put on the top and shorts, Wesninski," Allison says through her laughter, "We will help you with the rest."

Neil frowns but does so. "No cops fucking dress like this," Neil grumbles.

Allison falls to her knees with how hard she starts laughing.

The shorts were *short*. But Neil was happy to discover that despite the length of the shorts, Andrew had picked out a costume that covered his arms and torso completely. That being said, the top was tight. Neil pulled on the long socks.

"You can turn around," Neil says.

Allison turns and mutters out, "Holy shit Wesninski you have great legs."

The girls help him put the belts on his legs, which he learned were garter belts. And they helped style his hair and add accessories. Police hat, cuffs, a baton. Renee painted his nails with Jail stripes. And then Allison helped him ditch his tattoo again.

Finally they exited the bathroom. Matt was the first one to see Neil. Matt instantly began to choke on whatever he was drinking.

"Oh fuck! Oh shit! I am Bi-Bi-Bi," Matt said.

Dan grinned next to Matt. And she let out a cat call. Neil flushed and ducked his head before striding over and stopping next to Andrew.

"Well played," Neil says.

Andrew doesn't look at Neil's face, but starts from the bottom and slowly makes his way up, before offering Neil a two finger salute.

The foxes headed to Eden's Twilight after. Nicky, Allison, and Jean park their cars, while the others stride inside to find a table.

Neil stuck to Andrew like glue, people already staring at him. Roland made his way over to them. He gave a low whistle when looking at Neil. Then he turned to Andrew who pointed to the table full of foxes. Roland raised an eyebrow.

"Making friends Andrew?" Roland grinned.

"Shut it."

Neil was busy watching the surrounding area. A guy not far from them looked at Neil and then winked.

"I think he's having a seizure," Neil pointed. Roland and Andrew looked and the guy winked again, "I think you should call him a doctor or something."

Roland slowly pans back around to look at Neil, "I think he's just looking."

"Why is he looking at me?" Neil asks.

"I'd say probably because he's attracted to you," Roland says.

Neil stares blankly at Roland, "No that's not it."

Neil placed a hand over where he knew the word "ugly" was carved into his skin.

Andrew turns to look at him at that, and Roland raises a questioning eyebrow. Then he turns to Andrew.

"Say anything and I'll gut you," Andrew responds.

Roland raises his hands in mock surrender before putting together a tray.

Andrew and Neil make their way back to the table. Allison, Nicky, and Jean had made their way back. And as the tray was placed each fox grabbed a shot. Neil hesitated, but looked around and felt safe enough to grab one for himself.

Andrew raised an eyebrow, but Neil just shrugged. The foxes all tipped their shots back. The alcohol burned and Neil choked.

"That was awful," Neil groaned, before standing back up. "Give me another."

Matt laughed before handing Neil another shot.

Nicky looked worried, " Neil, are you sure you'll be okay? It's not drugs but it has the same effect."

Neil waved his hand about uncaring, " If I drink enough it's like poison right?"

"I'm cutting him after seven," Andrew says.

Neil passes on the cracker dust when it's handed out. And instead he takes another shot before Andrew could notice him doing so.

Neil was slightly buzzed, and feeling brave. So when the other foxes strode off to dance, Neil filtered through questions he wanted to ask Andrew. Renee was still at the table, slowly sipping her coke. Neil's eyes fell on her, and suddenly he remembered that all of the foxes had a bet on Renee and Andrew.

"Are you and Renee fucking?" Neil asked Andrew.

Andrew paused. Renee paused. They both glanced at each other, and had a conversation without speaking.

"Let me know when you're done with your secret council meeting," Neil says.

"No we aren't fucking." Andrew said.

"Why?"

"That's two questions in a row Wesninski," Andrew said.

"Then ask me something," Neil said.

Andrew was silent for a moment. And Neil thought for a second the conversation was over.

"Why didn't you believe Roland when he said that guy at the bar was checking you out?" Andrew asked.

Renee listened in, Neil wasn't sure if she was staying at the table because she was injured, or because she just disliked dancing.

Neil shrugged in response to Andrew's question. "You've seen me," Neil says, "I'm just not an attractive person."

Kevin picks his head up drunkenly from the table. Honestly Neil had forgotten the wasted man was there.

"He believes the shit Riko carved on him," Kevin says. But then Kevin's head thinks on the table and Kevin starts to snore.

Neil shrugs and points to where the words were located as he went along.

"Worthless." *Along his neckline.*

"Dirty." *Top left side of his chest.*

"Disgusting." *Under the word dirty.*

"Ruined." *Top Right side of his chest.*

"Broken." *Under the word ruined.*

"Unlovable." *Over his heart.*

"Undeserving." *Across his abdomen.*

"Nothing." *Directly under, undeserving.*

"Ugly." *His hip.*

"Atrocity." *His other hip.*

"Whore." *His left shoulder blade.*

"Slut." *His right shoulder blade.*

"Fucktoy." *His lower back.*

"There are more but you get the picture," Neil said.

Andrew's hand gripped his glass tightly. His jaw was set angrily. Andrew took another shot, and so Neil did the same.

"So why aren't you two fucking?" Neil asked, "The upperclassmen all seem to think it will happen."

"I'm not his type," Renee responded simply.

Neil was confused, "But you're like... supposed to be attractive."

Renee luckily didn't take offense at his words. She just looked at Andrew.

"I like men," Andrew said.

Neil thought about it for a moment. "I guess that would make things hard. Or I guess not hard."

Renee snorted as she took another sip of her coke. And Neil reached for another shot.

The foxes filtered back and Renee chose that moment to ask Neil a question.

"What's your sexuality Neil?"

Neil paused and the foxes all raised their eyebrows. They all sat down at the table. And Neil took that moment to down his shot.

Neil shrugged, "I don't know. I don't know what sexual attraction feels like."

The foxes exchanged a glance, and Neil looked at the pattern on the table, tracing it lazily with his finger. Had there been a pattern there before?

The foxes seemed to abandon the conversation at Neil's silence but Neil was getting to the far end of tipsy, and the alcohol was still kicking in.

"What's it like to want to have sex with someone?" Neil asked.

Nicky spit his drink on Seth. The other foxes glanced around with wide eyes.

"Well... uh..." Allison hesitates, "You might have a wet dream about them."

Neil frowned.

"Am I swimming with them?" Neil asked, "Why is the dream wet?"

"Oh dear god," Dan said, her face turning red.

"It's a dream where you're having sex with someone," Renee explained.

Neil's brows furrowed further, "I don't think I like those."

The foxes had a moment of painful realization.

"Not that kind!" Nicky said hurriedly, "It's the good kind of sex. The kind where both people feel good mentally and physically."

Neil glanced around in shock, "That exists?"

Beside him Andrew's grip on his glass was white knuckled.

"Yeah Neil," Allison said sadly. "That exists."

Renee looked thoughtful," You notice them more than others. You might pay more attention to certain parts of them."

"You get hard with them," Seth says.

Neil felt sick, "I got hard with the Ravens, does that mean— "

"NO!" The foxes all shouted it at once. And Neil was afraid Andrew might break his glass.

"Neil, forget about the Ravens," Nicky said," None of what they did was okay. Nor is it any influence on your sexuality."

Neil furrowed his eyebrows, "They are my only reference."

The foxes were silent at that.

"Well, was there ever someone that it felt right to try that with?" Renee asked. "Or maybe recently you found someone like that. Maybe you gravitated to them. Maybe you wanted that feeling of closeness."

Neil's sure she meant for his mind to flick to Jean or Kevin. But his face went white.

Because years ago there had been someone Neil had wanted that closeness with. Neil had trusted him.

Then one day that trust had died. And whatever feeling Neil had, had died inside him.

Neil's eyes flicked up to Renee and he swallowed. "Riko." He said quietly.

Then he felt bile rise in his throat, and he ran to the bathroom.

He retched into the toilet as he thought about it. Did that mean he liked it? Did that mean he wanted-

"Stop it," Andrew's voice cut through his mind.

"But I- "

"Stop it. It doesn't matter. It doesn't make what he did okay," Andrew said firmly.

Neil sank against the wall.

"He was the only one," Neil said.

"Was?"

"He told me he'd protect me." Neil said quietly, "When he became captain, he said he'd stop the rapes... he'd stop everything. But when the time came."

Neil glanced at the ceiling despondently.

"I haven't felt the need since that day... but God I'm fucked up." Neil said with a dry laugh.

Andrew waved his hand about, "Welcome to the club. I'm the founding member."

They sat together on the bathroom floor, quietly. Until the foxes got them for the return home.

Chapter 27

After Neil's math class on Monday, he had planned to go to the court and run drills. But as he fast-walked through the courtyard he noticed Renee. The girl was obviously struggling to hold all her textbooks. Her injuries made it hard to carry a backpack on her back, and she was only working with one arm. Neil began to jog over to her, and got there just in time to catch some of her books before they toppled to the ground.

"Looks like you could use some help," Neil said.

Renee gave a relieved sigh, "Yes I suppose I could. Thank you Neil."

Neil considered his options in his head. He had really wanted to go to the court after all. But really there was no competition in his mind. The thought of just handing the books back and leaving passed so quickly that Neil didn't even pause.

"Where's your next class?" Neil asked.

"I'm actually on break," Renee responds. "I was going to go to some stores and see if I could find anything for the twins."

Neil gave Renee a confused look, and she smiled.

"It's their birthday on Saturday," She says, "They are turning 20. Nicky says they never really celebrated the twins' birthdays, not for lack of trying of course, but I'm hoping that maybe this year they'll make an exception."

Neil highly doubted that. People like himself and Andrew hardly cared about birthdays. Mainly because every birthday for them had been filled with the same old pain and misery as every other day. They weren't something special. They were simply another day. And even though Neil didn't really know much about Aaron's upbringing. The fact the Aaron had been abused by his mother, likely meant Aaron didn't see much of a point to birthdays either.

"I think you're holding onto a bit too much optimism with that," Neil said. "I don't see either of them caring much."

Renee hums, "You're probably right. But even so, I still want to get them something."

Neil furrowed his eyebrows. "Is getting people gifts for their birthdays actually something people do?"

Neil briefly thinks about how that's probably a depressing question not to know the answer to. But Renee takes it in stride.

"It is," Renee said, "Though it doesn't necessarily need to be bought. I often make my gifts for Stephanie."

Stephanie, being Renee's adoptive mother. The woman who pulled Renee out of a dark past full of crime and murder, and placed her on the path of faith.

Neil wonders if maybe he should try and get Andrew something. He didn't know enough about Aaron to try. But giving a gift to Andrew sounded like something Neil *wanted* to do.

They went through a few shops in silence. Neil pointed out various things Andrew might use. Renee and Neil had settled on the fact that the twins might enjoy something practical.

"What about something Andrew can fidget with?" Neil asked. "His meds make him all fidgety and stuff."

Renee seems thoughtful at that, "Maybe a puzzle cube?"

Neil cocks his head to the side, not really knowing what that was. In response Renee walks off and comes back with a cube with various colors. One side was red, another blue, another green, another yellow, another orange, and the last one white. Each side of the cube was divided into nine squares.

Neil stares at it, "What does it do?"

Renee smiles before wandering off again, and coming back with a second one.

"Let's just have you find out yourself." Renee responds.

Neil decided that he hated the puzzle cube.

He had so much other shit to think about, but Neil's mind was stuck, day and night, on the fact that the colors on his puzzle cube were all out of whack.

He could be thinking about Exy, the fact that he might die at the end of this year, what to get for Andrew's birthday, how he really was at one time sexually attracted to Riko, working through his trauma, his maybe suicide attempt at the end of the year. But no. Neil had decided to fixate, on a damn cube.

By the time Wednesday rolled around and his addiction to the cube hadn't faltered even once, he decided he might as well talk to Betsy.

At some point in the time meeting with Betsy, she had stopped coming out to grab Neil and instead started sending Andrew.

Neil was still fidgeting with the cube when Andrew came up to him. He was growing increasingly annoyed with the green side of the cube. Neil failed to understand how he could have one entire side solved, but the entire rest of the cube still looked like convoluted mess.

Neil wanted to toss the cube through a window. But he felt the puzzle would mock him even then.

Andrew clapped to get Neil's attention. And Neil sprang up. With a muttered, "Stay here."

He didn't know why he told Andrew to stay behind. All he knew is that the puzzle cube was giving him anxiety and he needed to talk to someone about it.

Neil sped fast to Betsy's office, and by the time he got there he was sprinting. He burst into Betsy's office like a thunder cloud.

"I can't solve this cube!" Neil shouts slamming the door behind him. "You don't even understand how irritating it is. I have so many other things to focus on!"

Neil is pacing around the room, he hadn't even checked to see if Betsy was listening. He just started talking.

"I should be focusing on Exy considering that's kind of life or death right now. Or maybe I could focus on the fact that I really don't care if it's life or death, because I'm already dead inside. I could focus on the fact that one of my past rapists was my first *ever* sexual attraction, and the fact that I haven't felt any sexual attraction since *him*. I could focus on the fact that I can't eat a dessert because I am just *that* fucked in the head. I could even focus on the fact that I still have no clue what to get Andrew for his birthday on Saturday! But no! I am thinking about how to solve a *goddamn* puzzle cube!"

Neil finished his rant, breathing hard. And he finally looks at Betsy, who was still staring at the door Neil had slammed shut behind him. She blinked a couple of times, maybe she was still processing the info dump Neil had laid on her. Then she slowly turned to face Neil.

"How are you doing today Neil?"

"I'm annoyed and I'm dead inside," Neil said, "and I need this cube to stop with its bullshit."

Betsy takes a deep breath. "Sometimes we fixate on things when we don't want to think about others."

Neil stared at Betsy.

"Okay let's try this then," Betsy says, "Hand over the cube."

"But I haven't fixed it yet," Neil said.

"You can try fixing it after, maybe Andrew can help you," Betsy says, "He's good at those things."

Neil stares at the mismatched cube a few moments longer, before handing it over. Betsy shoves it in her desk, and Neil's eyes train on the drawer.

"Okay now let's talk about the other stuff," Betsy says.

"But the cube-"

"Is a fixation your using to avoid other problems." Betsy responds.

Neil felt the cube was closer to the wrathful hand of God. But he decided to humor Betsy and did his best to redirect his attention.

"Let's focus on one we can solve this time," Betsy says.

Neil's eyes dart back to the drawer at the word "solve". But he manages to drag his eyes back to Betsy.

"Why is getting Andrew a birthday gift on the list of things to think about?" Betsy asked.

And that was the thing. Neil didn't understand why getting Andrew a gift was so important to him all of a sudden. There was probably a good chance that Andrew wouldn't want whatever Neil got him anyways.

Neil's mind had first gone to buying something for Andrew. Then it had gone to making. And finally he had settled on baking Andrew cookies.

And as Neil had been looking at recipes online, he had found himself wondering why he even cared.

Neil shrugged in response. "I've been thinking of baking him something."

Betsy rose an eyebrow, "You sound hesitant."

Neil winced. His eyes suddenly found the drawer with the puzzle cube again. Betsy tracked his glance and then taped a piece of paper over the drawer.

Neil hesitated. But truthfully he had walked into the office by himself that day, and unloaded a lot of shit all at once. Betsy hadn't had a bad reaction to hearing that Neil used to be attracted to Riko. Neil honestly wondered if she'd be able to handle the conversation.

"When I ate dessert back at the nest... they expected... something in return," Neil said looking at the floor. "Now I can't taste the dessert without tasting them, and strong dessert smells have the same effect."

Betsy hummed. "But yet that is your idea of a gift for Andrew?" Betsy asked.

Neil shrugged. "It's a stupid idea I know."

"Not at all," Betsy smiles, "I think it's sweet of you. Baking is already such a chore you know. The fact that you know you'll struggle so much with it, but you still want to try for his sake is rather sweet."

Neil didn't feel sweet. He felt the same way he always had.

"That being said," Betsy says, "You shouldn't do it if it's going to cause you a great deal of stress."

Neil frowns, and fidgets a bit with his fingers.

"Mints help," Neil said. "I was thinking that if I kept one in my mouth while I baked, I might be able to do it with no problem."

Betsy considered this for a moment, before reaching into her desk and pulling out a few pieces of paper.

"Try some of these recipes," Betsy said with a wink, "They are some of his favorites. Make sure you text me though as you bake. I want to make sure you'll be okay."

Neil takes the recipes with shaking hands. Then she hands Neil the puzzle cube back.

"I think that's enough for today," Betsy says with a smile.

Neil still feels the pull to mess around with the puzzle cube. It's still annoying. But he also has the recipes. He has a problem with a solution.

Come Saturday morning Neil stared at the ceiling from his top bunk. He hadn't slept. His entire body thrummed with nervous energy. Finally he decided that he just needed to tear the band-aid off and he leaned down so he was dangling over the side of the bunk bed and staring at Matt.

Matt had woken up at six to go to the gym. But hadn't actually gotten up out of bed, instead he was on his phone. Matt didn't notice Neil at first, and Neil was trying to prolong the inevitable. But eventually Matt noticed Neil.

Matt raised an eyebrow and Neil sighed.

"I need to go to the store." Neil said.

Matt blinked at Neil. Then without a second thought or question. Got up, got dressed and got his keys. Neil didn't move, he just stared.

"You aren't going to ask why?" Neil asked, confused.

Matt gave Neil an incredulous look, "Bro, you literally never ask for favors. This is almost like a milestone."

Matt headed out the door and so Neil took that as his cue to get ready. He threw on a pair of Athletic shorts and a light long-sleeve shirt, before meeting Matt at his truck. It wasn't long before they were at the store.

Neil made his way down the baking aisle, reading the recipes thoroughly and throwing the ingredients he needed into the cart.

"What are you baking?" Matt asked curiously.

Neil stared at the recipes," One is a Red- Velvet cake, the other is chocolate chip cookies, and the last one is a chocolate chip muffin recipe."

"I thought you didn't like sweets," Matt said.

Neil was turned away from Matt, which he was thankful for, because his face burned red. He wasn't sure why his body had that type of reaction, it was rather annoying.

"It isn't for me," Neil responded.

Neil's face cooled down, so he turned to face Matt. His roommate was raising an eyebrow at him.

"It's for Andrew," Neil said looking for the next ingredients. "It's his and Aaron's birthday today."

Matt hummed, "You two are pretty close." Matt said," I really have no clue how you do it. Nicky said it was you who convinced Andrew to let us go to Columbia with them."

"I brought forward some points and Andrew agreed with them," Neil said.

"I'm not sure you understand how hard it is to get the monster to agree to anything." Matt responds.

Neil pauses at the name, "He isn't one."

"What?"

"He isn't a monster. I've seen real monsters. Andrew isn't one." Neil responds.

Matt is silent at that. But he's giving Neil a strange expression. Neil shrugs it off and grabs the last few ingredients, and some cream cheese frosting. Before checking out.

Neil set to work as soon as he got back. Matt and Neil got back around seven. So Neil figured he could finish by ten.

Neil had been wrong.

He texted Bee when he started and stuck a mint in his mouth. He still grimaced slightly at the smell of the Cocoa powder when he opened it.

He made the red velvet cake first. Adding in the various dry ingredients. The smell wasn't potent with the dry ingredients so he managed alright. Until he opened the bag of flour and it exploded in his face.

Matt made an audible snort of trying to hold back his laughter as Neil smacked his lips with closed eyes. In retaliation, Neil clapped his flour covered hands in front of Matt's face, covering Matt's clothes in flour as well.

Neil made his way over to the sink and washed off his hands. Then he began mixing the things like eggs, butter, and sugar into a separate bowl. Betsy had lent Neil various dishes and mixing tools. But she hadn't explained how to use them.

Neil had to fumble with the electric beater for a moment, before he finally got it on and almost mixed his own face.

Neil finally got to mixing. And when the batter was done he removed the mixer... before turning it off.

Both Matt and Neil were hit with red velvet cake batter straight in the face.

"Neil, Bro," Matt said carefully, "Not that I don't love you. But this is about to be a disaster."

Neil nodded, covered in cake batter and flour. "I can see that."

The cake was put in the oven and Neil popped another mint in his mouth. He tried to ignore the way the smell made his stomach twist.

He pulled out his phone.

To Betsy:

I can taste it now. Even with the mint.

It was only seconds before he got a response.

From Betsy:

Try focusing on the mint. Or find a different sense to focus on.

Neil looked around before noticing Matt's phone.

"Can you play music?" Neil asked.

Matt grinned, "Any requests?"

Neil shook his head, and Matt turned on music. Not only that but Matt did one better by plugging his phone into a speaker.

Neil focused solely on the way the ridiculous bass reverberated through the room. And soon the smell managed to fade to the background. The mint finally managed to do its job.

The chocolate chip cookies went slightly better. Except for the chocolate chips that went spraying everywhere. But the smell once put in the oven made Neil's stomach clench. He breathed deeply focusing on the music, and forcing his hands to stop shaking.

The muffins came out fine. But their making was an absolute nightmare.

Neil tripped and dropped an entire bag of flour onto the ground, burning his hand on a hot pan and turning himself into the ghost of baking past. Luckily the pan didn't have anything on it so none of Neil's hard work had been ruined.

When the baking was done, and the kitchen sufficiently messed up. Neil started icing the cake.

It was then that Dan walked in.

Her eyes settled on the kitchen. Then on Matt. Then on Neil.

Neil's hair had been turned white by flour. And the rest of him was powdered with it as well. His hands were stained red from the red food coloring he spilled on it. And he's pretty sure there was egg in his hair.

"Should I even ask?" Dan asked.

Matt turned to her, "He's found a new hobby."

Dan looks around the kitchen," I think he should stick to exy."

Renee walked in soon after Dan, but she simply allowed her lips to turn up into a smile.

"Need a taste tester?" She asked.

And Neil really hadn't thought about it. But it sounded like a good idea. He nodded and Renee grinned. The three upperclassmen each took a cookie and took a bite.

"Okay I'll take it back," Dan said. "These taste fucking amazing."

Neil received similar praise on his muffins and cake.

Neil found himself grinning.

To Betsy

I did it.

From Betsy

I knew you could.

Neil found himself grinning happily at his phone, and he packed up the various sweets into containers.

"Do you know if Andrew is up yet?" Neil asked Renee.

Renee grinned, but Dan sent Matt a questioning glance.

"He went to the roof when Nicky started trying to sing happy birthday," Renee said. "He's probably still there."

Neil nodded and went to leave, but paused, "I'll clean up when I get back!"

"Don't worry about it," Matt waved Neil off. "Promise you'll make me some more of those cookies and we will call it even."

Last week the answer would have been no. Neil wouldn't even be able to think of stomaching the smell of baked cookies. But instead Neil grins.

"Sure!"

Neil finds Andrew easily. Andrew had a bottle of alcohol opened in his hand. And he was sitting close to the edge of the roof, a cigarette in his hand.

Andrew didn't acknowledge Neil's presence when Neil got close. So Neil slid the containers over to him and sat criss-cross on the ground.

Andrew's gaze shifted to the containers, and then to Neil.

"Happy Birthday," Neil said awkwardly. Looking at the ground. "I... uh... baked these for you."

Neil chanced a glance up, but Andrew wasn't looking at him. Andrew was looking at the containers. The smile on Andrew's face was there, but there was a hint of some other emotion there. Andrew's eyes shifted to Neil.

"You get sick at the smell of dessert, and yet you baked three kinds for me," Andrew says, "I'm beginning to think you far surpass normal levels of stupidity."

Neil smirked, "You're only beginning to think that? You haven't even seen what levels I am capable of yet."

"Terrifying," Andrew said.

Neil grinned, "It wasn't easy but I did it! Maybe I should bake some for Riko and tell him to shove it up his ass."

"What a waste that would be though," Andrew said.

Neil turned to look out at the view. Deciding he wasn't ready to go back to the room filled with the smell of baked treats yet.

"Why?" Andrew asked, "Why'd you bake me stuff?"

Neil furrowed his brow. He didn't even really know the answer to that.

"It felt right," Neil finally settled on.

"I hate you," Andrew responded.

Andrew's medication was in full swing, but yet Andrew wasn't acting as crazy as normal. So Neil wondered if he had just taken it. The smile was still there, as was the restless fidgeting.

Neil was startled out of his thoughts when Nicky burst through the door of the roof.

"Oh good!" Nicky said, "Renee said you might both be here!"

Neil glanced at Nicky and Nicky gave Neil a once-over. It was then that Neil remembered he was covered in baking ingredients.

"I'm not going to ask," Nicky said, "Neil I need your help!"

Neil glanced at Andrew, who simply shooed Neil off.

Neil stood up and walked over to where Nicky was.

"My mom just called to wish Andrew and Aaron a happy birthday." Nicky said. "And while talking Mom brought up letting me come home for Thanksgiving. They said they want to make ammends."

Neil nodded but still asked, "Okay so what's the problem?"

"It will only happen if Andrew goes. And Andrew and my dad don't exactly get along."

There was the kicker. And Neil didn't understand what he was supposed to do about it.

"How am I supposed to help with that?" Neil asked.

"You have this weird way of getting him to listen. Please Neil—"

"Don't use that word," Neil warns.

Nicky deflates. "They're my parents Neil. I haven't seen them in years. I just want to talk to my mom and have a nice dinner with them again."

Neil looks at Nicky. And then turns back to Andrew. "Stay here," Neil says.

Neil strides back over to Andrew and sits down.

"Is there a reason you'd be opposed to going with Nicky to his parents' house for Thanksgiving? And I mean one other than they annoy you." Neil says.

Andrew's cigarette pauses partway to his lips. It was a slight pause, and soon Andrew is sticking the cigarette between his lips.

It's silent for a moment.

"I don't give second chances to people who say I'm lying when told secrets I planned to take to my grave," Andrew says smiling.

"You told him about Drake," Neil breathed.

"Ding Ding Ding!" Andrew says, chiming an imaginary bell. It was like whatever slight sobriety had been there before was gone completely, "Neil has earned a cookie, too bad you won't eat it."

"Stop that," Neil says. And Andrew goes quiet, raising an eyebrow. Neil frowns, thinking, "What if they came here."

"No."

"Think about it," Neil said, "It'd be in our territory. We'd have the high ground and control. If we get sick of it we can go someplace else on campus. Or we can hide in my dorm."

Andrew stared at Neil. And Neil continued.

"If they truly want to make amends with Nicky the least they can do is come meet him. If they don't Nicky can see how little they are willing to give. If they do, maybe things turn up okay. Maybe things don't and that's what makes Nicky give up on them completely," Neil says.

"Nicky is delusional," Andrew says.

Neil shrugs, "Maybe so."

Andrew is still silent. So Neil speaks again.

"Is Luther any type of physical threat?"

Andrew snorts, "You could fight him blindfolded."

Andrew is silent for another moment, and then nods.

"Go ahead Tweety-bird," Andrew says, "Tell my spineless cousin our compromise. And tell him to change the date. I don't want to see Luther on Thanksgiving. It will make my food

taste bad."

Neil gets up to tell Nicky the news.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

OKAY GUYS

TRIGGER WARNING

ITS DRAKE

AND ITS A HUGE TRIGGER WARNING.

I TRIED TO KEEP IT AS NON GRAPHIC AS POSSIBLE

BUT YOU ARE CONTINUING AT YOUR OWN RISK.

!!!!!!!

Nicky had managed to convince his parents to go with the compromise. It hadn't been easy, and at first Nicky's parents had said no. But then they called back and said yes. It made Neil more than a little uneasy. Nicky had talked them into the Sunday after the twins' birthday weekend, and somehow the rest of the foxes had all gotten involved with the plans. It was decided that the actual dinner would be held at Abby's. There was more room, and frankly Abby was a better cook than all of them combined. But the upperclassmen had also decided that the cousin's deserved some time alone with their relatives before sending Maria and Luther into the mix with the foxes.

The upperclassmen had left early in the morning, taking Jean and Kevin with them to Abby's house. Neil had almost also tagged along, but Andrew had grabbed the back of his hood and told him to stay put.

Aaron, Nicky, Andrew, and Neil were tasked with setting up the dorm. It only took all of 10 minutes for Andrew to get bored and start making his own decor, which consisted of stick drawings with gruesome murder scenes. One with a car made Aaron glare so hard that Nicky finally tasked Neil with getting Andrew out of the dorm.

Neil of course picked the court as the place to go, and Andrew had sighed. But the two of them made the walk since Andrew wasn't sober. And they practiced Neil's Goalie skills until they had to turn around and go back.

"Did you kill Aaron's mother?" Neil asked as Andrew and himself walked back to the tower.

Andrew stopped walking, his smile was still stretched wide against his face.

"Oh Tweety-bird," Andrew said, "If I told you that, I'd have to kill you."

"Now I definitely want you to tell me," Neil responded.

"For someone who has the suspicion that I killed my *own mother*, you aren't very scared. Why is that I wonder?" Andrew asked.

"Because you never act without reason, you always have a method to your 'madness'."

Andrew glances at Neil, "She got what she deserved. I told her not to lay a hand on him again. She didn't listen. She may as well have crashed that car herself."

Neil stared at Andrew, "So she was abusing him."

"Everyday," Andrew responded, "Got him hooked on drugs too."

"Is that why you agreed to let Luther take you 'home' or was it because of Drake?" Neil asked.

"You're asking for a lot of answers that aren't going to come cheap," Andrew responded.

Instead of waiting for Andrew to ask his questions. Neil offered his answers in advance.

"Consider this payment then," Neil said, " Back when I was five I was signed up for a little league Exy team. The plan was supposed to be that when I turned ten I performed in front of Tetsuji to convince him of my skills. But my mother ran away with me after my first practice. We lasted until I was six, and my father finally caught up to us. My mother was killed in front of me on my sixth birthday. Her blood was all over my hands. I was cleaned up and set in front of Kengo as proof of my capture. My mother was killed and I was raped for the first time all on my sixth birthday."

Andrew's gaze settled on Neil, "So I'm betting you won't be wanting any type of birthday celebration when you grow a year older."

Neil didn't respond, he waited for Andrew to say something.

"Cass was a good person," Andrew finally said. And it hadn't been what Neil was expecting, "She wanted to adopt me you know. I was going to let her."

"But Drake—"

"Was a known threat with a silver lining." Andrew finished, " At least after he was done I got to have homemade cookies and a parent who didn't beat me."

Andrew's smile was still on his face, and the way he spoke was as if all of what he was saying was a part of the world's best comedy sketch.

But Neil understood. It hurt how much Neil understood.

"So did you finally get sick of it?" Neil asked.

"No," Andrew said, " Cass wanted Aaron to visit. And Drake had a thing for twins."

"So you *did* do it for Aaron," Neil said, "Then why are you two always fighting."

Andrew looked at Neil, and his grin turned dangerous.

"Not everyone believes me when they say I keep my promises. Aaron took a deal, and then disliked the consequences and blamed me." Andrew said.

Neil wanted to ask more questions, and he found that he didn't mind if that meant he had to share more of his own past. But before Neil could ask anything else, both his and Andrew's phones went off.

From Nicky

Where are you!? They're here!!!

Andrew flipped his phone closed, and began to walk again.

"Don't you find it odd they agreed to be here?" Neil asked.

"Oh Tweety-bird! I thought that was the plan. You're the one that came up with this compromise." Andrew responded with a laugh.

"I proposed it," Neil agreed, " But I honestly didn't think they'd agree. They sound too stubborn to be serious about making amends. I figured my compromise would be getting them to call their own bluff."

Andrew smiled, "I think I'm rubbing off on you Tweety-bird. You're acting a little paranoid. Maybe we should take Luther to Columbia."

"I thought you called it prepared," Neil said, " Not paranoid."

Andrew hummed.

"Tweety-bird, why do you think I sent Jean and Kevin to Abby's where the big kids are?" Andrew said.

"Does that mean the reason you let me stay is because you've finally given up on protecting me?" Neil asked, smirking.

Andrew glanced at Neil, "No you're with me because for some reason you're the only bird who searches out the windows, power lines, and hunters."

Neil glared, "I don't need a babysitter."

"I seek to have forgotten, who is the one who tried to jump out a window to get his phone?" Andrew asked mockingly.

"Who's the one that keeps threatening to push me off stuff, but decided to save me anyways?" Neil shot back.

"I hate you," Andrew said.

"I hate me too, you aren't special," Neil responded.

They arrived back at the tower so their banter came to a close. Neil opened up the door and started up.

"Are you sure it's a good idea that I go in?" Neil asked, " I can wait outside."

"Tweety-bird do you believe in God?" Andrew asked.

Neil paused at the odd question, and looked at Andrew in annoyance.

"If God is real," Neil says, "Then I hope Satan wins during the apocalypse, so that God goes to hell and I can shove my foot so far up his ass that he can taste the amount of shit I've trudged through."

"Oh this will be wonderful," Andrew responded. His medicated smile grew wide.

Neil hated Luther ten seconds after meeting him. It likely would have been sooner, but Nicky took ten seconds to introduce everybody.

Then Luther stuck out his hand for a handshake and Neil wanted to kill the man. It was the way he held himself, as if Neil was still a child who needed to obey him. Neil wanted to wring his neck before he even spoke.

"You must be Neil," Luther said.

Neil stared at his hand until Nicky whispered out, "*Neil!*" And then Neil sighed and obliged.

They all sat down around on different chairs and tea was handed out. Andrew stared at his tea and then put it in front of Neil, before crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

The first question that was posed, was posed towards Neil. Neil wishes for a moment that he had Andrew's reputation with these people. Andrew had been regarded with wary glances. But Neil had been picked out for questioning.

"Are you religious?" Luther asked Neil.

Neil almost responded with the same bitter answer he'd given Andrew in the hall. But the attitude must have shown on Neil's face before he spoke, because Nicky made a desperate cutting gesture at his throat.

Neil bit his attitude back and simply said, "No."

Nicky winced and Neil realized that the "no", had had a bit of attitude laced into it anyway.

Whoops.

Luther frowned, and continued to regard Neil with a look. Neil was pretty sure he knew what Luther wanted, but Neil hardly thought the God loving minister could handle Neil's answer to why he wasn't religious.

Beside Neil, Andrew was grinning like he was slowly unwrapping a present at Christmas; and had already checked and seen what it was.

"Is there a reason as to why?" Luther asked.

Neil looked to the ceiling, trying to think of an answer that wouldn't kill Nicky's parents with a heart attack.

"I've lived a life that makes it difficult to believe in God," Neil says. It's a challenge not to grit his teeth.

"Surely it can't be that hard," Luther said, "Just look around you! There is evidence of God everywhere."

Nicky looked like he wanted to say something but Andrew cut Nicky off.

"Shut up Nicky, the interesting part is coming," Andrew said.

Luther ignored him, and continued to stare at Neil.

Neil searches for an answer again. And Luther takes his silence as a sign to continue.

"See, sometimes we fall off the path of righteousness, and it's hard to see God. We think he's gone or lost. But really he's there waiting for us to make the right decision."

Neil bit his tongue to keep from intersecting with a rude comment. But Andrew was watching Neil's face with a gleeful expression that was most certainly *not helping*.

Luther droned on, "And sometimes bad things happen to good people. A person's son might turn away from God."

Nicky flinches, and Andrew stills. Neil stares at his tea and wonders if he can throw it hard enough to kill Luther. Luther keeps talking.

"Sometimes someone dies. But it's important to remember that God doesn't make these things happen. He just let's them happen, as a test of our character."

Neil's eyes snap up at Luther. A deadly glare on his face.

"Oh fuck," says Aaron.

"Shit," Says Nicky.

"Here it comes," says Andrew.

"Oh yes!" Neil says letting his lips turn up ever so slightly, "I'm sure that I needed to be punished as a three year old when my dad pushed a burning hot iron against my shoulder and burned me for not sitting still enough when the cops came by. I'm sure I deserved it when my mother was killed in front of me, her blood running down my face on my damn birthday all because she tried to save me. I'm glad that when that same day some older guy asked if he could fuck my pretty little ass and my dad let him, that God was just doing what was best for me. Im super happy that I got sold to some abusive fucks who raped and cut me up my entire life. I'm happy that it wasn't God protecting my friends but me. And I am so fucking thrilled by all of that, that I constantly am endangering myself so I can see the man himself sooner. I hope that when I finally do see him, his father beats him, his mother dies, and he gets fucked up the ass by the devil so that I can watch as he screams; and I'll let it happen. It'll be a great test of his character."

There was a stillness to the room as Neil finished talking.

"I think he's gotten more volatile," Aaron mutters.

Luther and Maria were stunned and pale faced looking at Neil.

"Careful Neil," Andrew says with a grin, "They might start trying to exorcise the demon out of you."

"Oh they should definitely throw some holy water on me," Neil says, "We can cook dinner on my skin when I start to sizzle."

Nicky claps his hands, "OKAY!!!" Nicky says looking frantic, "I think it's time to head to Abby's don't you?"

Luther blinks, looking away from Neil.

"Oh yes of course!" Luther says. His voice sounded strained.

They all got up and left the room. Neil lagged behind beside Andrew. Once they get outside, Luther stops and waits for Andrew.

Andrew grows tense beside Neil.

"Let's chat," Luther said to Andrew.

The others look back, but Luther waves them along.

"I'd rather not," Andrew says, " See I'd rather cut you."

"Andrew," Luther said disappointedly.

Neil watches as a person walks into the doors behind them. They were wearing a hood up over their face. It wasn't strange, college had a lot of people walking about in hoodies, but Neil was looking for literally anything else to focus on other than Luther. Andrew's eyes were trained on Luther's face.

"Luther." Andrew mocked back.

"Just hear me out and then you can go back to your room and not see me for the rest of the day," Luther responded.

"Hear that Neil," Andrew said, "He wants me to hear him out!"

Luther sighs, "I know we cast you all out—"

"No I just hated being around you," Andrew interrupts.

Luther continues on like Andrew hadn't spoken, "We plan to show you guys love and mercy as the Lord teaches from here on out. I apologize for not helping you all find God sooner. I left you a gift in your room, alcohol. Nicky said you might enjoy it."

Neil feels irritated by Luther's droning.

Andrew seemed to disregard everything but the part about alcohol.

"Wow!" Andrew says mockingly, "Great offer, why don't I think about it while I go drink that gift. Tell the others that I'm not going."

Andrew walks towards the doors and Neil goes to follow.

"I think you should let him be," Luther said, grabbing Neil's arm. Andrew was already out of earshot.

Neil yanked his arm away and muttered, "Fuck off."

Neil jogged and caught up with Andrew easily.

"Do you want me to go?" Neil asked.

Andrew regards Neil with a glance, "Do what you want."

Neil decides he wants to stay with Andrew. They walk in silence to the dorm. The dorm was nearly empty. Very few cars were parked out front, so neither Andrew or Neil saw many people around.

Andrew got to the door and unlocked it.

"I should take you to see Luther more often Neil," Andrew said, " You certainly made things—"

A glass bottle crashed over Andrew's head and Neil didn't even have time to blink before he was pressed against the wall in a choke hold. He tried to kick but then his legs got pinned too.

"AJ!" The man who'd attacked Andrew said. Neil struggled to breathe. "You brought a friend! He's not your brother, but he's pretty enough to play."

Neil caught a glimpse of Andrew's unconscious form, before a fist pulled back and smashed into his face.

Neil's vision went dark.

When Neil awoke his vision was still dark. He groaned in pain and tried to touch his head, but his hands were tied.

Neil began to panic. He searched his memories, and groaned when a flare of nausea erupted in him.

"Your friend is up AJ," A voice said. And suddenly Neil remembered everything. "He missed our first round, but we have time. Dinner takes a while after all. I need to call someone for permission to play with him though. I'll be right back."

Neil can hear Andrew's labored breathing. He can hear footsteps. He needs his fucking vision, without it he was spiraling.

"Hey Neil!" Andrew says laughing, " We should have gone to dinner after all! Apparently Luther drove Drake here!"

Neil can hear the rage hidden behind the laughter. And he hears Drake's voice from the other room.

"I can't see," Neil chokes out.

"Be glad," Andrew says.

"No," Neil responds, " Blind folds make you hyperspace of every touch. I can't—"

"You need to relax Tweety-bird," Andrew says, " Hurts more when you're tense."

"Fuck you," Neil says but he can't place any heat behind his words, " Did he already get you?"

"First time is always the hardest," Andrew responds. "But my medicine let me just float away."

Neil's rage filled him like an inferno, he fought against the bindings, but there was no give.

"Are you tied up too?" Neil asked.

It was truly a stupid question.

"He would not be alive if I wasn't," Andrew responded, "It's a shame I never learned how to be an escapist like Houdini."

"Are you blindfolded too?" Neil asks.

"Nah that's only you," Andrew responds.

Neil goes to respond but he hears the door to the bedroom open. He hears footsteps draw nearer. And then a hand settles on Neil's cheek.

Neil bites it.

"Son of a- "

A hard slap on Neil's left cheek sends Neil's head snapping to the side.

Neil breathes heavily, tasting blood on his tongue.

"Riko said you'd be feisty," Drake said. "Nate right?"

Neil's hands shake and he twists them into his bindings to ground himself.

"Fuck you," Neil spits.

"You two are lucky I have so much stamina," Drake says. It makes Neil sick.

Drake kisses at Neil's neck. Neil's heart thumps in his chest. But he forces himself to laugh.

"Stamina doesn't make up for you having a tiny fucking dick," Neil spat.

Neil regretted that statement in minutes. He figured the minute amount of prep he got was for Drake's sake not his. He tried to free his legs to kick but he didn't get a chance.

"Andrew, don't watch," Neil begged.

Andrew didn't respond but Neil figured he'd been heard. He trusted Andrew to do as he asked.

"Isn't that Sweet," Drake said," Riko said you two were close. I might have to try something with you two."

"Fuck you—"

Neil's stream of insults was cut off by his own scream of agony. His hands were a white knuckled grasp against his bindings.

"You could have been a good boy like AJ, and had me be gentle. But you just had to be a fighter."

"Fuck you," Neil gasps out, the pain shooting through his back and legs was blinding. "AJ is such a stupid fucking name. You're such a stupid fucking dick. Small ass motherfucker I hope you—"

Another scream rips from Neil's throat, and this time Drake cuts it off by choking him.

Neil scrambles, his natural instinct to pull the hands off, but he couldn't do anything restrained. He couldn't see. He couldn't fight.

When Drake finished Neil was shaking. But still he forced himself to laugh.

"Stamina my ass," Neil choked out. His throat felt destroyed. "You barely lasted five minutes you impotent fuck! You know quality actually beats quantity, but not everyone can be good at it. Makes sense why'd you have to force people to sleep with you."

Neil's head snapped to the side with a punch from Drake, and he let out a sharp cry.

Neil felt his hands being untied, and he readied himself to fight. But as soon as he was untied, he was put in a chokehold and being dragged. He couldn't see where he was being taken. But he felt himself get shoved hard. Neil's head spun and he stumbled, landing on another warm body.

The body tensed at the contact, as did Neil.

"I want to see you play together," Drake said.

And *no. No. NO.*

Neil would not.

Neil laughed. "I'd rather die. What are you out of stamina? Can't fuck me yourself? Pathetic."

Andrew tensed further underneath him.

Neil went up to take off his blindfold. But a fist caught the side of his face. Neil fell off the bed and onto the floor.

"Neil," Andrew said, but Neil could hear the strain." You're going to get yourself killed."

"No," Neil said, "I won't be a trigger! And you won't be mine!"

Neil reaches again for his blindfold, but Drake kicks Neil hard in the stomach.

Neil gasps.

"You'll do as I say," Drake's voice is irritated, and angry.

Neil chuckles darkly, "Make me."

Neil is being hauled up and out of the room in seconds. The panic is already there. But it rises when he feels the tiles of the bathroom under his feet.

Neil feels the chill of the water before he's submerged.

Neil's entire body is held under freezing cold water. He's held there. He can feel numbness setting in. He feels the freezing water burn his lungs. He's lifted out. He's put back. He's lifted out and then he's back.

Neil coughs and sputters and hurls insults. Then he's hauled out. Yanked somewhere and then thrown back on top of Andrew. Neil's entire body quakes with shivers. He manages to hold himself up off of Andrew's body, but he knows he's dripping cold water all over Andrew.

"Come on Nate," Drake says, faking sweetness.

Neil feels cold all over, and he's hyperspace of every single touch.

"Find your porn elsewhere," Neil says. "I'm not touching him."

Neil gets yanked off again. And the process repeats. Only this time Neil is hyper aware of how Drake feels inside him while he's being drowned.

Neil repeats his no. Spits in Drake's face. Kicks and punches.

Neil didn't know how much time had passed. But he knew someone had to be coming soon.

Drake ties his hands at one point, and binds Neil's ankles. Then leaves Neil in the tub, to go "play" with Andrew again. Neil lays there, energy having been depleted with his decreased body temperature.

When Drake came back. Neil couldn't even throw a punch. He couldn't walk. His entire body was in the first stages of hypothermia. When he got shoved on top of Andrew, Neil didn't have enough strength to push off of him.

"I can't feel my arms," Neil says quietly, "I'd get off but I can't feel my arms."

"I'm tired of this," Drake said, "Do as I say."

Neil laughs, "Fuck you. I'm too tired. Come back tomorrow."

Drake strides forward, but Andrew speaks.

"Touch him again and I'll kill you," Andrew's voice was steely. And Neil knew the medication had worn off. Andrew was crashing.

Neil is shivering and his teeth are chattering. He's hauled off of Andrew again, and Neil can't fight.

"You seem a bit too tied up for that AJ," Drake says.

Neil can't scream anymore, he's too cold. He can only manage a pained whine as he's pressed against the floor.

Then Neil hears a door open, he hears someone shout. And then there is a gunshot. Neil yelps as Drake's body crushes him against the ground. He can smell blood.

"Fuck Andrew!" Aaron's voice said.

"Untie me! Now!" Andrew's voice is firm.

There's noise. And Neil feels tired.

"Andrew you're hurt!" Aaron said.

Drake is off Neil and the blindfold is being taken off. When Neil opens his eyes he sees Hazel.

Neil looks around and sees Aaron gawking at his brother. Neil lunges for the bed, breathing hard with exhaustion. He grips the blanket and pulls it so he can wrap it around Andrew's shoulders.

Andrew looks just as bad as Neil. Neil shivers again and then let's himself collapse to the floor in exhaustion.

Neil feels Andrew pull him under the sheet with him. But that was too much skin.

"I can't--"

"Aaron get him a blanket," Andrew says.

Neil shakes again. "I'm tired."

"Stay awake Wesninski." Andrew orders.

"Oh my God!" Neil can hear Allison, and Neil is suddenly glad, despite the contact, that Andrew had the knowledge to pull Neil under the blanket with him.

"Wesninski, open your eyes," Andrew orders.

Neil forces himself to open his eyes. The light is bright. And he feels himself getting wrapped in his own blanket. He gets pulled off and placed next to Andrew.

" 'Drew," Neil mutters tiredly. Neil shifts his gaze to where Andrew is next to him. "You need to take off yer knives. The police will be coming."

Neil watches as Andrew yanks off his armbands and throws them off to the side.

"You need to take your meds, if they see you're off them. You know they'll try to blame you." Neil said his eyes droop close again. But Andrew slaps him lightly to wake him up. The other foxes show up. Nicky comes in.

Everything feels like it's moving underwater.

Neil doesn't like the water.

"Aaron get me meds," Andrew says, keeping his eyes on Neil.

"Fuck Andrew," Aaron says, "Now?"

"Do it," Andrew grits out.

Nicky walks up to Andrew and reaches for him.

"Don't touch us," Neil breathes out. "He's touched us enough."

Nicky's hands retreat in horror. His hands clamp over his mouth.

Aaron hands Andrew a pill, and Andrew swallows it dry. Neil droops and falls forward, but Andrew stops him from slamming his face into the floor.

"Turn on the heat Aaron," Andrew says.

The thermostat was next to the bathroom, and Neil heard the moment Aaron saw inside, "Oh my god," Aaron said, "There's blood in the bathtub."

"I must be bleeding down there," Neil says tiredly.

"We both are," Andrew grits out. "Nicky, where's your father?"

Nicky didn't answer, he didn't have to. Luther stepped into the room, a horrified look on his face.

"Oh Luther!" Andrew said. Neil could tell he was already fighting the medicine's effects, "Wanna tell me again how much I misunderstood? Wanna tell me again how Drake is just showing his affection? Wanna tell me again how I'm lying?"

Luther goes to talk.

"You knew better," Andrew growls out. A hint of a smile is making its way onto Andrew's face, "And yet you bring him here, where my brother is!? You knew better to do that Luther!"

"This has happened before?" Nicky breathes out the question.

Neil is hysterically laughing, "Yeah and Luther knew, Drew told him!"

Neil's shaking as the laughs peter off.

Nicky is looking at his father horrified.

"Luther," Andrew said, "That's not even the worst part. You see, I promised someone my protection, and because of your actions they got hurt too! Luther, when I can stand you better, I hope you're a fast runner because I will kill you!"

"Not your fault," Neil says, slumping back against Andrew. He was too cold to stay awake. He was too cold to sit up. "We don't have a deal, it isn't on you. We stumble together."

Andrew's grip on Neil tightens. "I hate you."

"Good to know that hasn't changed," Neil said.

Sirens for the ambulances is what Neil hears as he finally goes limp in Andrew's arms. And then Neil can hear Andrew's medicated laughter like a piercing alarm, as he drifts to sleep.

Chapter 29

Neil awoke to a pain in his head, and familiar voices around him.

"I'm getting really tired of passing out and waking up in pain," Neil said with a tired laugh. He finally got brave enough to open his eyes but he winced when he did so.

"You have a concussion," Abby says, "You'll be sensitive to light for a little while."

Neil felt sensitive to sound as well. The Heart monitor was annoying and getting old quickly. Not to mention the amount of exposure he would have if he suddenly had an internal panic attack.

"Shut up!" Neil said glaring at the computer. It showed the spike in his anger as it continued to beep.

"Oh no!" A mocking voice said, "Bee you gotta watch out. He's starting to talk to his imaginary friends!"

"At least I have friends," Neil shot back at Andrew.

"Friends are a waste of time and space," Andrew said waving his hand.

"Am I not a friend?" Neil asked with a smirk, "You seem to keep me pretty close."

"You're an annoyance, but you're interesting." Andrew said, "Speaking of interesting, do you always act like a dumbass in situations like that. Provoking Drake and calling his dick small was not a smart move, and you know it."

"The day someone breaks me enough that I don't have my attitude, is the day I die. It's the one thing I kept throughout all this time, I won't lose it." Neil said.

Neil glanced over at Andrew, wincing again at the light from that side of the room. Andrew's throat was bruised, and he had bandages covering his head. Andrew's face was bruised, and Neil was willing to bet under that hospital gown was a mass of bruising too. Andrew's wrist was splinted, and his other arm was in a sling.

"Drake said he went easy on you," Neil said, "He's more of a liar than I thought."

"He went easy until I crashed and could focus enough to fight back," Andrew said with a grin. "He wasn't too happy when I got out of my restraints."

The adults in the room either didn't know what to say, or didn't want to interrupt the weirdly comfortable moment that was occurring.

Investigators came in. They instructed the boys how to stand for pictures. Andrew and Neil leaned on each other for support during the entire thing.

After that was all done, the two of them were handed clothes. Andrew changed first. Neil heard the shower turn on, and knew that it would be a while.

"We will be switching up the dorm rooms," Wymack said garnering Neil's attention, "I couldn't get another four person dorm. I could only get three two person dorms on the same floor as the foxes. Andrew said you two will be taking one together, is that okay with you?"

Neil blinked. The conversation hadn't been one he'd been expecting.

"Why are we switching?" Neil asked. "Also I'm not even affected by the change since I'm with Matt and Seth."

Wymack glanced at Neil, "I asked which person Andrew felt he most needed to keep close and Andrew picked you."

Neil glowed, "I only tried to jump out a window to grab my phone one time!"

"And now I don't even question his judgment. Wesninski you are a hazard to society." Wymack said. "The foxes handled moving your guy's stuff while you two were here."

Keys are thrown onto Neil's bed," Those are for your new dorm."

Neil picked them up and added them to his keyring. The new key clattered against the one for Andrew's home in Columbia. Neil twisted the keys around in his hand. Wymack stared at Neil for a moment before leaving. Abby followed him, and soon enough Betsy was the only one left.

She perched herself at the end of Neil's bed, the shower was still running.

"I was tasked with filling you in on everything," Betsy said," We can do it now, or we can wait."

Neil was tempted to wait, but he figured he'd rather it come from Betsy than the foxes. The foxes wouldn't be able to hold their tongue, especially not Nicky.

"Go ahead and do it now," Neil said, gripping the sheets tightly. Dark purple bruises encircled his wrists from the ligatures Drake had used.

"First things first," Betsy said," How are you feeling?"

"Like I just got raped and tortured," Neil responded dryly.

Betsy didn't react to Neil's bluntness, she just nodded, "Is there any extreme pain I should notify the doctors about?"

Neil went through his body bit by bit, focusing on each area, "No part that they probably don't know about. My back hurts but that's normal after this stuff."

Betsy nodded, "They said that you didn't need stitches down there, but they still recommended a liquid diet for a few weeks."

Neil nodded, "I have a list of stuff I can eat when that happens."

Betsy nodded. "Okay. Then onto the rundown. Drake survived, but he's being monitored to be taken into custody as soon as he's released. Aaron was placed under arrest when the cops arrived, he'd been the one to fire the weapon."

"Where'd he get it from?" Neil asked.

"Drake had put his gun down in the kitchen at some point," Betsy responded.

Neil nodded. "How long did he have us?"

"The foxes were at dinner for 2 and a half hours." Betsy said, "I'm assuming that's how long Drake had you, approximately."

Neil's hands went to his curls, and he pulled on them weakly.

"Why does this keep happening?" Neil asked, "They all say I'm ugly and unattractive, so why me? It doesn't... it doesn't make sense. Why Andrew? Why me? Why us?"

There is a moment of silence and Neil begins scratching at his wrist. Betsy catches his hands and holds them gently in her own.

Neil focuses on them and grasps them tightly.

"People like that don't do it because they want to feel attraction," Betsy says gently, "It's about power, taking a person and making them submissive to them. It has nothing to do with who you are. There is no good reason for why they do what they do. There is no reason that this should have happened. You didn't deserve this. Sometimes bad things just happen to good people, and all we can do is get back up and keep going. Making tomorrow better for ourselves."

Neil feels himself slump forward, and he allows his forehead to fall onto Betsy's shoulder. Betsy didn't move to embrace him, she let Neil have control of the touch.

"I do have one more thing I want your opinion on," Betsy says.

Neil sits up.

"The court, in light of recent events, wants to take Andrew off his medication. You know Andrew better than any of the foxes, and Nicky said I should ask you," Betsy says.

Neil thinks about Andrew's maniacal laughter. The drugged smile Andrew had on his face even after this event. The medicine wasn't good.

"He was laughing," Neil said, "When Drake was hurting us, Andrew was laughing. That isn't— It isn't him. That medication was wrong the day they put him on it. He's not dangerous unless someone gives him reason to be. There is no good reason as to why he should be kept on that medication."

Betsy squeezes once at Neil's hands, and then steps off the bed at the moment that the shower turns off. Andrew strolls out moments later, his smile still on his face.

Neil grabs his change of clothes and starts his routine.

The drive back to fox tower was filled with Andrew's pointless rambling. And Neil rested his throbbing head against the cold glass of Betsy's car.

The foxes were waiting outside when Neil and Andrew got back. And Neil froze when he saw that Luther was standing there too.

"Andrew don't," Neil said when Andrew's eyes locked onto Luther. The foxes were watching them from their place by the doors.

Andrew ignored Neil and strode towards Luther.

"Luther!" Andrew called, "I am disappointed. I thought you'd know better than to land in *my* line of vision again."

Luther's eyes landed on Andrew and he tensed, but the holier than thou posture remained and it made Neil sick.

Andrew and Neil couldn't conceal their limps completely, but both had practice moving with them. So even though Andrew approached Luther quickly, Neil still managed to jump in between them.

"Don't," Neil said. Andrew's eyes darted to Neil, "Trust me I know he deserves it. He deserves every second of what you want to do to him and more."

Luther made an offended noise, but Neil didn't give a fuck.

"But you don't deserve prison, and Nicky and Aaron don't deserve watching you get thrown into the back of a squad car. Kevin and Jean don't deserve to lose their protection."

Andrew steps around Neil, but Neil stops him again. Andrew's eyes are focused on Luther.

"I don't deserve to lose you," Neil said. And at that Andrew's head snaps to Neil, "I consider us friends, family even. I don't deserve to lose that just because of Luther."

Andrew is silent. And it's as if no one even dared to breathe. Andrew's smile is still on his face, but his eyes never leave Neil as he speaks.

"Get out of here Luther," Andrew says, "If I see you again, Neil won't be able to save you."

Luther makes a noise, "Nicky he can't just—"

"Leave Luther," Nicky says quietly, "If you bother us again I'll ask Andrew to kill you."

Andrew's eyes are still on Neil, but Neil can see out of the corner of his eye when Luther makes it to his car. He feels the need to be a smartass grow strong inside himself.

"Hey Luther," Neil calls out over his shoulder. He waits for Luther to look at him before he turns and makes direct eye contact, "You're just like your God now."

Luther stares at Neil in incomprehension, and Neil smiles, "A complete and total waste of space, who doesn't do shit when someone needs him, who makes excuses for why, and then drives the monsters to your doorstep so that you can be tested. How does it feel?"

Luther gets into his car without another word. Neil can see Maria in the passenger seat, holding her head in her hands. And then Luther drives off.

Neil's not sure why the foxes keep away from Andrew and Neil, but other than checking in at the door the foxes leave the two of them well enough alone. Nicky tries to talk to Andrew, but Andrew pulls a knife out and Seth carries Nicky off.

Andrew and Neil's dorm was set up well enough. Apparently the foxes also made trips to the store to make sure the fridge was stocked. Neil's mountains of mints were placed neatly on the counter along with the baked goods Neil made Andrew for his birthday.

As soon as they got into the dorm, Andrew set to work on removing the screen from the window. It didn't take long, and when it was out, Andrew threw it carelessly into the closet. It was late. It felt like days had already passed since Drake. But really it had only happened that very day.

The two sat in silence. Neil could hear the adults talking in the hallway. Neil could tell that Andrew was finally crashing from his meds.

"You said that the Ravens made you beg that one time by holding you down in a tub full of ice water. You didn't just beg them to stop, you begged them to fuck you just so you could leave that water," Andrew said. The smile was gone. "Yet you refused to do what Drake told you to. Why?"

Neil sat in the window with Andrew, they both had one leg inside and one leg out. It was in no way comfortable for Neil, so he doubted it was for Andrew either. But still they sat. Andrew passed over a cigarette and Neil lit it and took a drag before responding to Andrew's question.

"You didn't consent to me touching you. And even if you had it wouldn't have been genuine. You were the first person to ever ask me 'yes or no'. I said it once, I'll say it again. I won't let them make you into my trigger. And they'll put a bullet through my head before I become yours." Neil said.

Andrew stares at Neil, the cigarette hanging from his lips.

"I hate you," Andrew says.

Neil doesn't respond. He thinks.

"Other kids went through that then?" Neil asked.

Andrew's jaw clenches, "There weren't supposed to be any other kids."

Andrew finishes one cigarette and moves on to the next one.

"There were others though," Neil said, "What'd you honestly expect?"

"I expected Luther to keep his end of our bargain, and talk Cass out of taking in anymore," Andrew says.

"He's not someone who keeps his word," Neil says back.

"Don't worry Wesninski," Andrew said, "I've already destroyed the little bit of optimism I had left, don't need you doing it for me."

"Why didn't you ever tell Higgins?"

"He wouldn't have believed me," Andrew responds, "Him and Drake were friends. Compared to someone like Drake, I was a lying kid starved for attention."

"You weren't though," Neil says, glancing at Andrew.

"When has that ever truly mattered to anyone?" Andrew responds.

Neil flushes, and is thankful that Andrew wasn't looking at him. He curses himself for the confusing reaction, and looks out at the view of the campus.

"It matters to me," Neil says, " You aren't what people think you are."

Neil avoids Andrew's gaze, but he can feel Hazel eyes boring into the side of his head.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

Strong fingers grasp Neil's chin in a gentle grasp, and turn Neil's head. Neil feels frozen by Andrew's gaze. Eyes that Neil has only had glimpses of sobriety in, were now filled with an intensity that Neil couldn't even begin to describe. They track down his face, as if searching for the lie in Neil's words.

"I've never lied to you," Neil said, " I've kept secrets, we both have, but I have never lied to you."

Andrew's hand moves to the side of Neil's face. A thumb tracing along Neil's jawline.

"I hate you," Andrew says.

"I know," Neil responds.

But even if Andrew hates him, and only keeps him around because Neil is interesting. Andrew's still the only person to ask 'yes or no'.

Morning comes, with neither Andrew or Neil having slept. Andrew takes another pill, and Neil feels whiplash when Andrew starts smiling again.

They didn't leave their room, instead they sat together as Andrew finished the desserts that Neil had baked for him. Andrew made jokes, and poked at Neil's appearance. Neil rolled his eyes and returned Andrew's jabs as good as Andrew dished them out.

A knock on the door caused Neil to jump, and Andrew to halt in ramblings. Andrew went to answer the door, but before Neil could see what was going on, Andrew stepped out into the hall. Neil waited, not really wanting to go out and face the world yet. But when he heard Andrew's voice raise he stepped out.

Kevin and Jean stepped out too, looking on with wide eyes. The other foxes joined suit. And at the center of it all was Betsy and Andrew.

"What's going on?" Dan asked.

Andrew smiled wide, "See Bee! Dan will tell you how bad of an idea this is! Dan! Bee here wants to take me off and get me off my happy pills!"

Dan's eyes went wide, as did the other foxes'.

"You can't!" Kevin said. "We need Andrew to play!"

Neil's temper flared, "Is that really what you're concerned about right now Kevin?"

Kevin looked ready to snap at Neil, but then his eyes landed on Neil's face. His eyes went to Andrew's face. Then his eyes fell to the floor. Jean said nothing, but his jaw was set nervously.

Nicky remains silent. And Aaron was still in police custody.

"I don't think this is smart," Matt said.

"Agreed he's on it for a reason isn't he?" Allison throws in.

Dan went to speak as well, but Neil had had enough. His fists clench and he glares at the foxes.

"Leave!" Neil says angrily.

The foxes stare at Neil, their eyes wide. But finally they step inside their dorms. Nicky is the last one to step into his dorm. Andrew laughs manically.

"Neil's growing a spine Bee!"

"Stop it," Neil says.

Andrew's laugh halts, and he spins to Neil.

"You need to go," Neil says.

"Oh Tweety-bird," Andrew says, "I don't *need* anything."

"You *need* this. You can't tell me you are happy on those drugs," Neil responds.

"I'm never happy," Andrew points out.

"So you'd rather pretend you are with a false smile?" Neil asked, "If it's about protecting your people I can do that. You know I can. You know I won't let anything happen to them!"

Andrew's gaze is sharp. "They aren't who I'm concerned about," Andrew says, "Or have you forgotten my promise to you with that concussion of yours."

Wymack is walking towards them down the hall, Abby beside him.

"Put your promise to me on hold until you get back," Neil said, "And I promise you that I'll be alive when you see me again."

"You won't have a goalie," Andrew says.

"We have one more game," Neil responds, "The team isn't even that good. I can handle being a Goalie for one game. Injured or not."

"Absolutely not," Wymack shoves in finally, "You will not be playing with those injuries. The foxes have already decided to call the match forfeit."

"Oh coach!" Andrew smiles, "No can do then. See I'm not leaving if that's the case."

"Minyard this is not the time to start giving a shit about Exy," Wymack says.

Neil knew it wasn't about Exy. To Andrew, promises meant everything. A deal meant everything. Neil understood.

"If you're off your medication," Neil said, " You'll do better in games, if you're so concerned about helping us make it to championships, then you need to go."

"But if you forfeit the matches you don't have much hope do you?" Andrew responded.

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm missing half the fucking story?" Wymack asked.

Neil swallowed hard.

"You've got to give them something Tweety-bird," Andrew said, smiling still. "Maybe Coach will let you play if he knows."

Neil considers his options. Andrew wasn't going to leave unless he knew Neil could play.

Neil ushered the three adults into the room and took a deep breath. He hadn't wanted to tell them about the deal with Ichirou. But Andrew needed to come off his drugs.

"This season is life or death for me," Neil says.

The adults' attention snaps onto him, and Neil blows out a breath.

"I made a deal with Ichirou in order to leave the nest." Neil continues, " To prove my worth as an Exy player, the foxes need to win Championships. If we lose... I will be taken away."

Neil didn't elaborate further. He didn't need the adults knowing the details. But he had said enough. Wymack's jaw was slack, Abby's face was white, even Betsy looked concerned.

Neil continued, "The last two teams aren't even all that good. In goal, there is a low chance that I'll get checked. If I don't pull any stupid stunts and I'm careful about my head it should

be fine."

Abby sat down, and covered her face. Neil could tell that this was going against everything she wanted. Betsy looked equally torn. Wymack however didn't hesitate.

"Abby?" Wymack asked.

"This is dangerous," Abby said, "I can't condone-"

"There's only a chance I die if I step out on the court. But if we don't make it to championships it's certain." Neil said.

Abby was silent. Her entire frame tense.

"You will rest this entire week," Abby says warningly, "You don't step on the court unless it's for a game. You sleep, you eat, you do your homework, and you see Betsy. If you step on the court before Game Day I will bench you."

Neil breathed, "I understand."

Betsy breathed, "Are we going then Andrew? I'm taking you to Easthaven."

Andrew was glancing at Neil.

"You are protecting them?" Andrew asked.

"You know no one will hurt them," Neil says. "I won't let them."

"You promise you'll be alive when I come back?"

"Yes."

"You will be the first person I see when I get out?"

"Yes."

Andrew takes Neil's hand, and presses the key to his car into Neil's palm.

"I'm leaving you in charge while I'm gone," Andrew says.

"Then you'd better hurry back before I decide to redecorate," Neil says with a smirk.

Andrew laughs manically. And then he packs to leave.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

6014 words

After Andrew left. Neil returned to bed. He hadn't realized how much he'd come to feel comforted by the blonde's presence until Andrew was gone. Neil still ached in places he never wanted to ache again, and Neil's body was finally feeling too exhausted to sleep.

Sleeping in an empty door room was difficult. Neil had grown used to Matt and Seth's quiet snores. Without them there, Neil was suddenly hyper-aware of every little noise that occurred. Eventually though he managed to fall into a restless slumber.

Neil shot awake at the sound of footsteps in the hall, and then voices.

"Aaron!" Nicky called out. And Neil had to calm his racing heart.

Neil fell back onto the bed, tired and drained. Then he got up and went to the door. He was too tired to see anyone, still too high strung and nervous for touch. But he still listened, wanting to know if Aaron was alright.

"Where's Andrew?" Aaron asked.

Neil sat against the door and slid down it.

"He left to go to rehab," Nicky responded, "Their taking him off his meds."

"What about Neil?" Aaron asked.

"His new dorm," Nicky responded, " Abby has him practically on bedrest, but I guess they're going to let Neil play Goalie for the next game. Dan was livid. She started shouting at Wymack and Abby. But she calmed down when Wymack said he wouldn't let it happen without his reasons. Aaron, are you doing okay? Do you need me to call Katelyn? What are you—"

"I need to speak with Wesninski," Aaron said.

Shortly after Neil felt the knock on the door. He stood up, but waited a moment before opening it. Neil's legs burned and he leaned heavily against the door to face Aaron.

Aaron winced at the sight of him. Neil's sure the injuries only look worse as they set in more.

"You look like fucking shit," Aaron says.

Neil chuckles dryly. He swayed forward but Nicky steadied him.

"Thanks," Neil said, " I thought I looked like a runway model, but it's nice to be humbled."

Neil steps back, limping back into the room. He finds one of the beanbags and falls into it heavily. He winced at the landing. There's a click of the door, and suddenly Neil is alone with Aaron and Nicky.

"You knew," Aaron says, " After it happened you knew about Luther knowing."

Aaron's tone was accusatory.

"How long have you known?" Aaron asked.

Nicky goes to rebuke Aaron for being rude, but Neil responds, "Which part?"

"About Drake," Aaron responds.

"Since Higgins came," Neil responded. "Though back when Higgins first called I asked Andrew if any people from his past might be someone Riko could use against him. And he'd said yes. So I guess I knew about Drake but not by name."

Aaron plopped down on the other beanbag heavily, looking lost, "Why did he tell you? Why after only months of knowing you has he opened up, but years of knowing me he still shuts me out."

Neil glances at Aaron.

"I know and understand his boundaries," Neil responded, "I have a lot of the same ones. Survivor to survivor type thing. Plus I've never asked him for a deal, and then blamed him for the result."

Aaron glares, "What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Andrew told me what happened to your mom. He said he did it cause she hit you one too many times," Neil said.

Aaron stood up angrily, "You're lying."

"I don't lie," Neil fired back, "Lying never does me any good. He said it as we walked back to the tower to meet with Nicky's parents."

Aaron glared at Neil, but the glare was weak.

"Hey," Neil laughed, " At least now you're even. He killed your abuser, you killed his. Maybe now you can stop that stupid fight you two have."

Aaron didn't respond. And after a moment, he stormed out.

"You said you thought Drake might be sent by Riko a while back," Nicky said, " Do you think—"

"I know." Neil said, " Drake mentioned Riko by name."

Nicky winced. "I should have just ignored them when they called," Nicky said, " Andrew was right. They really weren't worth this."

"Andrew didn't think Luther would pull something like that either," Neil said, " When I asked if Luther was a threat, Andrew told me no."

Nicky was silent at that.

"I think I'm going to call Eric again," Nicky finally said. Nicky left the room in a rush. And Neil curled up in the beanbag, and fell asleep.

It was later Monday night that foxes decided Neil shouldn't be alone at night. Neil didn't remember much, but he'd come to while being held tight in Kevin's arms. Blood and glass was everywhere.

Kevin and Jean's dorm was right next to Neil's. So Kevin heard the glass break and hurried over. Luckily Andrew had had the foresight to give Kevin his set of dorm keys.

Tuesday morning the foxes decided on a cycle called Neil-Shift, which Neil had glowered at. But internally he felt somewhat relieved. The idea of sleeping by himself again terrified Neil.

Tuesday night Neil took Seth, Kevin, Jean, and Nicky to the court. He almost threw Seth and Kevin out the windows on the way there. The two would not stop bickering.

"I swear to god I will pull this car over!" Neil shouted, "And it *will not* be pretty when I do!"

Seth and Kevin had slumped against their respective windows. And Nicky had sent a grateful glance in Neil's direction from the middle seat. Jean was laughing beside him.

"I will throw you out of this car Jean," Neil glowed.

Jean smirked, " Sure you will."

Neil felt the need to apologize to Andrew suddenly for every time he'd been a smartass. The feeling passed quickly.

The court wasn't much better. It took all of three cones getting set up before Kevin was correcting how *straight* the cones were set up. Neil wanted to see how *crooked* he could make Kevin's nose, but he restrained.

Instead he yelled for them to knock it off, and got out his phone.

Andrew and him had never really texted or called when Andrew was there. So Neil's messages from Andrew were entirely blank. It seemed wrong considering how much the two of them talked in person. And Neil found himself sending a message because of the simple fact that he could.

To Andrew

Apparently Kevin has an OCD issue where the cones have to be perfectly straight. Just letting you know that I really want to kill him right now, but I am restraining. Never let it be said that I have no self control.

Neil sent it, never-ending the fact that Andrew most certainly wouldn't receive it. But as Neil thought further on the message, giving progress reports that Andrew could look back on seemed like a great idea.

He was cut out of his musings by Kevin and Seth getting into another bickering match. So Neil sighed and put his phone to the side. And proceeded to start throwing Exy balls at them until they shut the fuck up.

Matt slept in Neil's room Tuesday night, and by the time Neil got back, Matt was already fast asleep. Neil went to the window instead of going to bed, he was tired but he was also not looking forward to the darkness when he closed his eyes.

Andrew's sweatshirt was hanging over the chair in the kitchen when he passed. It was the same sweatshirt Neil had worn the morning after his first night in Columbia. He didn't even think about it as he threw it on.

The fabric was soft, and Neil could smell the faint smell of cigarettes and Andrew on it. Neil sat in the window and pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of the hoodie. He smirked.

To Andrew

I found your cigarettes!!! They are mine now >:)

On Wednesday drove Aaron, Kevin, Jean, and Nicky to practice, before driving himself to Betsy's. Neil's hands flexed nervously on the wheel.

Neil was still limping, albeit not as bad as before. But still he got odd looks as he walked inside. The press had been jumping all over the story about Drake since it happened. So Neil wasn't sure if the state of his injuries were what concerned people, or if they actually recognized his face. Either way, the attention was getting old fast, and Neil was happy when Betsy finally collected him for their session.

"No puzzle cube this time?" Betsy asked.

"I can't afford to fixate on anything but protecting Kevin and Jean," Neil responded. "Though I'm about ready to shove a racket up Kevin's ass."

Betsy laughed at that, "I think Andrew said that same thing one time to me."

Neil winced at the mention of Andrew. He placed a hand over his chest. Every time he thought of Andrew being so far out of reach, Neil felt a physical ache. He didn't understand it.

"How are you faring with Andrew gone?" Betsy asked.

Neil shrugged, "I've decided to keep him updated via texts he can read when he gets out."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Betsy grins.

Betsy tries to talk about Drake, but Neil shakes his head. Betsy nods and moves on.

"Bye Bee!" Neil calls out.

Before Neil drives away in Andrew's car, he pulls out his phone again

To Andrew

I just called Betsy, Bee. I blame you.

Later, at practice, Katelyn came along. She held a megaphone when she walked into the court. She had just come straight from her own practice. The foxes began messing around with it, pressing buttons and making all the sound effects blare. Neil decided he needed something like that for the night practices.

Neil caught up to Aaron and Katelyn after practice. Aaron glared at Neil, not having been exactly pleased with Neil since Monday. But Neil didn't really care.

"Do you have another one of those megaphones by any chance?" Neil asked Katelyn

Katelyn grinned.

To Andrew:

I've acquired a megaphone. If Kevin wants to be a little shit. Then let him.

That night at night practice Neil blared the megaphone siren everytime Kevin spoke. And eventually Kevin got the hint.

After practice Neil went back to his dorm with Seth trailing after him.

"Where do you think you're going to go for winter break?" Seth asked.

Neil shrugged, not really knowing, "I was planning to just stay here."

Seth stared at Neil for a moment, "Dude that's fucking depressing."

Neil shrugged again.

"Well Matt and I are talking about visiting his mom up in New York," Seth said, "You should come with us."

Neil shook his head, because as fun as that sounded he couldn't leave Andrew's people to go on a vacation.

"I need to stay with Aaron, Nicky, Jean, and Kevin." Neil said.

"We could probably take them with us!" Seth said. "It'll be the perfect chance for Aaron to thank Matt's mom for paying his bail. And besides I don't think Nicky will be returning to Germany with Andrew locked in Easthaven. And I'd like to be sure he's alright."

Neil thought about it for a moment before conceding with a "maybe", before rolling over and going to sleep.

The next morning he texted Andrew again.

To Andrew:

Might take your group and go with Seth and Matt to New York. It sounds like fun, and I think Nicky would have a good time.

The foxes met for lunch on Thursday, and Neil was feeling well enough to make the trek to the Cafeteria at last.

He'd spotted the foxes, much to the thanks of an excited Nicky.

He pulled out a chair and sat across from Renee.

The foxes were lost in chatter about the game, and spring break. When Seth threw out the idea of Nicky, Aaron, Jean, Kevin, and Neil joining them for spring break, Matt's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"That sounds awesome!" Matt threw out, "My mom would love to meet you guys!"

Nicky jumped in excitedly, "I think it sounds like a great idea! Aaron you would get to thank Matt's mom in person!"

Neil's eyes settled between Matt and Aaron.

"Why did she pay Aaron's bail anyways?" Neil asked.

The foxes made an uncomfortable glance towards each other. Then finally Matt spoke.

"The monsters... kind of... drugged me?" Matt said, but it sounded like more of a question than a statement.

Neil stared at Matt incredulously. Somehow he felt like he'd stepped into the twilight zone.

"I got hooked on drugs by my dad," Matt explained, "He encouraged me to do them at some of his parties. My mom found out and got me help, and I was doing well until my Freshman year here."

"We had a lot of drug addicts on the team," Seth said.

"Wasn't that you a few months ago?" Neil asked.

"Shut up," Seth pointed at Neil, and Neil rolled his eyes.

"Either way," Matt said interrupting, "I struggled a lot."

"He slept on our couch to avoid the temptation," Allison threw in.

Matt rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. "Andrew's freshman year came, and well Andrew noticed. Andrew called my mom to ask her for her consent, and my mom gave it. She knew how much I was struggling here. She knew I wasn't happy. So Andrew took me to Columbia and gave me speedballs. My mother came out after to help me with the withdrawal. It was the worst experience of my life, and it turned me off drugs for good."

"That seems like a really fucked up thing for your mother to owe them for," Neil said.

"You weren't here," Dan said, "Matt was... having a hard time. The monster's methods were questionable but effective."

And well Neil guessed you couldn't argue with results.

To Andrew

Matt's mom apparently paid Aaron's bail. It sounds like we'll be going up to New York for Christmas.

The game on Friday was more boring than Neil had thought it would be. Between Matt and Jean on the backline, and Neil's "good enough even with a concussion" Goalie skills, they managed to shut out the other team completely.

And with Seth's training, and Kevin's growing aptitude for using his right hand. The strikers managed to lock in a score of 0-10.

Neil hardly even had to lift his racket.

To Andrew

Shut the other team out when I played Goalie tonight. Better hurry back before I steal your position and stats.

Neil grinned as he sent the message.

After the game the foxes pulled everyone into a celebratory dinner. Aaron tried to protest, but ultimately Nicky had sent him a glare and a quiet, "Aaron Matt's mother paid your bail". And Aaron relented.

Neil stuck to the sidelines for most of it. The Vixens were invited, and Aaron spent alot of his time with Katelyn.

Neil could see how different Aaron was when he was with Katelyn. It was like the girl pulled a whole new side of him. Neil's mind flitted to Andrew, and how Andrew managed to pull something new out of Neil.

But the thought was quickly abandoned when Kevin began to power chug the vodka-spiked punch.

To Andrew

Just saying that Kevin was the one who got so drunk he smashed his face into the floor. In case his nose is slightly more crooked when you get back.

Thanksgiving came next, and Neil found himself at Abby's with more food in front of him than he could ever possibly eat.

His mind flitted to Andrew, who was by himself for the Holiday, and Neil sent him another message.

To Andrew

Happy Thanksgiving! Or maybe just Thanksgiving, I really don't see what's so great about eating so much food.

The upperclassmen had all gone home for the holidays so Andrew's group, temporarily renamed Neil's group, were the only ones at Abby's house for Thanksgiving.

Neil drank a small amount before placing his glass off to the side when Kevin began drinking like he would die in ten seconds.

To Andrew

Perfect prank idea for Kevin. Super glue his vodka shut. It also doubles as an intervention.

Monday marked the end of the Exy season. And the foxes came back from their holidays with a renewed energy for Exy. They hit the court like their lives depended on it. Neil found it amusing that his was the only one that did, and yet he was still sitting on the bench.

The foxes also ended up migrating to the dining hall at the same time. Aaron seemed displeased, but truly Andrew's group went where Neil went when Andrew was gone.

So Aaron stayed quiet.

On Tuesday they held another team dinner, and Katelyn showed up, bringing smiles and cheer that had Neil staring at her in disbelief for most of the night. And on Wednesday the foxes went downtown.

Neil stayed back Wednesday, not wanting to deal with the throbbing headache he'd get with the noise.

Andrew's group had gone even when Neil stayed behind.

To Andrew

The team is out downtown. It seems like everyone is getting along. Maybe when you get back we can all go.

Friday came, and Matt approached with the plane tickets for Andrew's group to come along to New York.

Neil had handed them out before stuffing his own underneath his pillow. Right beside Andrew's knives.

To Andrew

I've never been to New York. It should be fun.

To Andrew

Kevin threw a cone at Seth during practice today.

To Andrew

My concussion is finally cleared.

To Andrew

I had a panic attack today. I was alone. But I tried something Bee taught me to do and ended up just fine.

To Andrew

I think I will permanently steal your sweatshirt. It's warmer than any of the one's I own and I like the colors.

To Andrew

Fucking teachers are assigning way too much homework.

To Andrew

Jean pranked me today by covering every surface of our dorm in goldfish crackers. I got him back by pouring it into his bathtub. Suck it Jean.

To Andrew

I did it. I superglued all of Kevin's vodka bottles shut.

To Andrew

The prank did nothing. Kevin broke the top off with a hammer and still poured himself a drink.

The season was two weeks behind them, but still Seth, Nicky, Kevin, Jean, and Neil met for night practices. Results began to show in the way that Kevin berated Nicky and Seth less.

Andrew had been gone for five weeks, and it came to the time for the Winter banquet. Neil sat with Renee on the bus ride there. Something that had all the other foxes staring with wide open mouths.

"Dude," Matt says looking between Renee and Neil, "You are stealing everything of Andrew's. His car, his girl."

Neil smirks at that, and Renee giggles.

Seth however throws in, "What if Renee is stealing Neil!?"

Neil's smirk drops and he looks at Renee confused.

"What are you stealing me from?" Neil asks.

"Not what-"

Seth is cut off by his own yelp when Renee kicks the bottom of his seat.

"Don't worry about it Neil," Renee says. "Seth is being stupid."

The rest of the foxes apparently think so as well, so Neil settles back for the rest of the seven hour drive to Breckenridge.

The banquet started off better than the last one. Apparently whoever had planned it had had enough foresight not to place the foxes across from the Ravens again.

The foxes sat across from the hornets. Neil expected there to be some level of distaste for the foxes, but the two teams managed to get along just fine off the court.

The room was loud, but it went quiet when Tetsuji stepped up to the microphone. He tapped the microphone a few times to get everyone's attention, and Neil winced at the loud sound.

"The season rankings have been decided," he said. He didn't need to stretch it out. Everyone had done their own counts throughout the season. "The following four teams have qualified to represent the southeastern district in spring championship games. I will list them in order of ranking, first to fourth. Edgar Allan, Palmetto State, Breckenridge, Belmonte."

Tetsuji finished speaking and then handed off the microphone to a much more enthusiastic coach. Most everyone ignored the blessings and congratulations the coach offered.

"I can't believe you foxes beat Breckenridge," one of the female Hornets said, "You Ex-Ravens must be the real deals."

Neil shrugged. The fact that they were ex-ravens was only part of it. Their ranking was primarily because of the foxes general ability to pull it together even in crisis.

The new brackets were given out, placing the foxes in the Evens bracket, much to everyone's pleasure.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief that they weren't going to play Edgar Allan again so soon.

Dinner came, but Neil was more focused on keeping an eye on the Ravens than eating.

When it came time to clear the court for the games and socializing, Renee linked herself with Neil's arm. They each got themselves a drink and headed to the side where they could keep an eye on things.

"I hope you don't mind me accompanying you," Renee said, "My normal date isn't here at the moment."

Neil was confused, Renee hadn't brought a date to the first banquet, had she?

"You mean Andrew?" Neil asked.

Renee nodded while smiling, "It got the others off our backs about bringing dates. Andrew didn't have to bother with finding a girl he could tolerate. And I didn't have to listen to Allison's list of twenty football players I could bring."

Neil smirked knowingly, "Football players aren't your type?"

Renee smirked at Neil, "You can figure out that, but not anything else?"

"Hey! I figure out a lot of things!" Neil said.

Renee just smiled.

Jean and Kevin stayed close without needing to be told. The four of them stuck close to the wall.

Just like Neil knew they would, the Ravens made their approach. Riko stood in front and led the slow, relaxed, but yet still threatening charge over to them.

"Renee," Neil said, pulling Renee's gaze from her phone, " We have company."

Kevin and Jean stood on either side of Renee and Neil. Neil stepped forward, placing the three behind him.

"If I tell you to go," Neil said to Renee, " You take Jean and Kevin and go someplace else."

Renee looked like she wanted to argue, but something in Neil's face must have made her pause. She gives a small nod.

"Nate!" Riko calls, " You seem to be missing a player. What happened? Oh wait! Wasn't there a story about it in the news—"

"Are you going to get to the point Riko," Neil said smiling, " Or are you going to sit here measuring your dick all night. Measure it all you want, it's not getting any bigger."

"I see your last instance with pain has not dulled that attitude in the slightest," Riko growled.

"And I see that your narcissism has yet to let you see any of your... inadequacies in anything. How pitiful." Neil said, shaking his head at Riko as if scolding a small child.

Neil could see the foxes watching from off to the side, all of them were out of hearing distance. But they were close enough to intervene if things got ugly. Wymack was nowhere in sight.

"You will hold your tongue," Riko growled.

"Make me," Neil grinned brightly at Riko. He took a sip of his drink.

"You little—"

While still sipping his drink, Neil held up a painted middle finger at Riko. Behind him Renee laughed.

Riko lunged and slammed the cup out of Neil's grasp. Neil gave Riko an unimpressed look, and then inspected the spot where the cup and its contents had hit the floor.

Neil sighed. Forcing himself not to shake in fear. There would be no way to hide the tremors in his body. So instead Neil channeled every suicidal urge in his body, and stopped giving a fuck.

"Renee, can you take Jean and Kevin, and get me a new drink," Neil said, ignoring Riko's presence. "It would seem a child has bumped into me."

Renee looked hesitant, but luckily Kevin and Jean knew how things worked. They each took hold of Renee and began walking her over to the drinks station. Once they were gone, Riko caught Neil's chin in a bruising grip.

"I was going to play nice Nate," Riko growled, "I was going to give you a chance to apologize."

Neil glared, "You? Nice? I'm calling that as a fresh serving of utter bullshit."

The grip tightened. And Riko's grin grew.

"It's in your best interest to behave and listen," Riko growled.

Neil huffed out a laugh, "Oh I'm sure it is." The sarcasm dripped heavily from Neil's voice.

"Don't you remember Dr. Proust Neil?" Riko asked innocently.

Neil's entire body tensed. He remembered that name *too* well.

"He's not my doctor anymore," Neil forced out, "You can't threaten me with someone who I'll never see."

"Oh but you see Nathaniel," Riko said, "Proust recently got a new job four weeks ago. He moved on from the office on our campus. He now works in a hospital. I hear he's working with rehab patients."

Neil felt his heart drop.

"You're lying," Neil said. But he knew better. Riko wouldn't lie about this.

Neil thought of Andrew at Easthaven, defenseless without his knives, and vulnerable during withdrawal.

"I'm not and you know it." Riko said, grabbing Neil's shirt collar. "And you'll listen carefully to what I'm about to say."

Neil saw the foxes beginning to move in, but Neil held up a hand to stop them. They did as he asked, but they didn't look happy about it.

"You are going to spend Christmas with me at Evermore," Riko growled, but then smiled, "Isn't that nice Nathaniel, you're coming home."

Neil glared, "Like he'll I—"

"Your mutt has already been through a few of Dr. Proust's lovely treatments, how about I call him and have him do a few more. I hear Minyard likes that kind of thing." Riko said.

Neil saw red and lunged. Within seconds Neil had Riko pinned against the wall. His fist crashed into Riko's face and threw him to the side. Riko hit back, but Neil didn't notice. He only noticed when he was torn off Riko, and Riko got torn off him. They both stood glaring and fighting to get back to pulverizing the other.

Kevin and Jean were still out of hearing distance. And Riko switched to Japanese.

"You will come, or Minyard will get the same therapeutic treatment you got until he leaves Easthaven. Maybe Proust will even decide he needs a few more weeks," Riko growled.

"Fuck you," Neil growled, *"I hope you're paying for my plane ticket, because I'm not wasting my money on visiting you. And I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, so Proust better be brought to Evermore as insurance."*

Riko grinned and finally allowed himself to get yanked away. *"See you then,"* Riko growled. *"Tickets will be in the bathroom. Fourth stall behind the toilet."*

Neil feels himself get torn away. And he hears people yelling at everyone around to calm the fuck down. He hears someone telling the coaches to keep Riko and Neil apart. But Neil doesn't listen. His mind is racing.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Wymack's voice is enraged and it pulls Neil back to the present.

The upperclassmen, Jean, and Kevin were all staring at Neil with looks of disbelief.

"He was talking about Andrew. Saying shit about Drake." Neil snapped.

Wymack looked ready to snap back but Nicky came running up with Aaron.

"What happened?" Nicky asked running up.

"Neil punched Riko," Matt said grinning slightly.

"It was fucking gorgeous," Seth agreed.

"Fuck!" Nicky said, "I missed it. Do it again."

"Alright," Neil shrugs and moves to go punch Riko again, but Wymack catches him.

"Don't encourage him," Wymack snaps at Nicky.

Nicky shrugs. But Seth looked curious.

"What was Riko saying that got you so mad?" Seth asked.

Neil couldn't lie very well, but he could tell half truths.

"He said shit about Drake," Neil said, "But the fact that he sent Drake in the first place meant I was already pissed."

"He what!?" Dan shouted. And everyone else looked shocked as well.

Neil flipped around to stare at Nicky. "You didn't tell them what I told you?"

Nicky stared back at Neil, "I thought it was a secret."

And Neil rolled his eyes, because trust Nicky to start keeping secrets then.

"I'll fucking kill him," Seth says.

The rest of the foxes nod in agreement, but Neil glares and says, "No."

"Neil he—"

Neil cut Dan off, "You think he's scared of us? You think a quick death would be all he deserves? No. We are going to take the one thing he fucking loves away from him. We aren't losing a single game this spring!"

None of the foxes speak, rather they stare at Neil in stupefied amazement.

Neil didn't have time for it. He needed to grab those plane tickets, he turned to storm off but Wymack gripped his arm.

"Now hold on just a damn minute—"

"I need to use the restroom," Neil snapped back.

The hand on his arm disappeared, and Neil left for the restroom.

His stomach was churning with anger still. But buried beneath that like a tidal wave waiting to envelope him whole, was bone deep fear.

He finally got into the stall Riko said the plane ticket was in, and reached around the toilet.

Sure enough, an envelope was tucked behind it.

"Fuck," Neil said to himself. His voice cracked. "FUCK!"

He slammed his fist against the wall. His entire body was shaking. He promised himself he'd die before he went back. He'd promised himself he'd kill himself before stepping back into that he'll. The paper felt like a lead weight in his hand, despite only being a fucking peice of paper.

Neil rested his head against the wall. There had to be another way. There had to be. He went through his options.

If he told Bee Andrew was in danger, Bee could move Andrew somewhere else.

Except there was nothing stopping Proust from going to the next hospital too.

He could tell Bee Proust's name. Except the moment Bee implicated Proust by name, it would be obvious she knew too much. If anyone ever found out how much the foxes knew, they'd become loose ends. Not just to Riko, but to the main family. They'd be disposed of. Neil thought of Bee laying dead at the hands of someone like his father. Neil thought of Wymack in the same position. Neil thought of Abby being slaughtered slowly, and he found himself heaving into the toilet.

Neil knew he had to go back. There wasn't any stopping it. For a brief moment he entertained the idea of being selfish. But then Neil imagined Andrew helpless, and lying beneath the disgusting body of Proust. Neil took a sharp heaving gasp. He had to go back.

To Andrew:

I'll be going back to Evermore for break. Proust won't touch you again. I promise.

That night, Neil paced his dorm. When Kevin, Jean, Nicky, and Seth showed up for practice, he sent them by themselves. He was content that Riko wouldn't try anything. Not when Neil was coming the very next day.

Neil's mind swirled but he tried to push the panic down. He needed to figure out a way to keep the foxes ignorant of his plans.

There was no way they'd let him go.

But at the same time, if he didn't tell one of them, Riko could keep him longer than break. Riko could hide him away, and the foxes would be none the wiser. They'd think maybe he was killed, maybe he ran. They'd never think he went back willingly into Riko's arms.

If he left a note for after he went, there was no doubt in his mind the foxes would chase him down and yank him back, kicking and screaming.

Neil was still pacing when his answer came in the form of a knock. And when he opened the door to see Aaron standing there, the peices finally fit together.

Neil yanked Aaron inside without a second thought.

"HEY—"

But Neil cut Aaron off with a hand over the blonde's mouth. Aaron glared.

"I need you to promise me you'll hear me out before you run off and tell the others," Neil said urgently.

Aaron's eyes narrowed. And Neil sighed.

"Promise me?" Neil asked.

Aaron huffed out a sigh behind Neil's hand, before nodding.

"If I'd known being your temporary roommate for the night meant your disgusting hand over my mouth, I would have said no." Aaron spat. Then he sighed, " Well... don't fucking keep me in suspense."

Neil took a breath, "I need to go back to Evermore for break."

Aaron stared at Neil in silence for a few minutes, before making a lunge towards the door. Neil was faster though and slammed it back closed before Aaron could get it open.

Aaron turned and glared. "You're fucking stupid."

"You promised to hear me out," Neil said.

Aaron glared again, "That was before I learned that I might as well be helping you commit suicide."

"Would you abandon your shitty humanity for two seconds?" Neil spat.

"Fuck you," Aaron said, before trying to get the door open again.

Neil sighed, "Riko's going to hurt Andrew if I don't go."

Aaron paused. He stopped trying to get away.

"Riko can't hurt Andrew," Aaron spat, "Andrew wouldn't let him."

"Riko sent Drake!" Neil said.

"Drake's in prison," Aaron said, "He can't hurt Andrew from there."

"You think Riko has a shortage of rapists under his belt!?" Neil asked hysterically, "Riko has plenty of sick connections with sick people who do sick things."

Aaron turned away from the door, and faced Neil completely.

"What do you know?" Aaron asked, " You know something, just like how you knew about Drake. I'm getting really sick of this shit Wesninski! It wasn't until you showed up that people started getting stabbed and raped!"

Neil flinched back. It was true, he knew it was. But he didn't have time to think about that.

"That's why I need to go," Neil said, " There's a doctor at Easthaven. A therapist. He used to be my therapist at Evermore. Riko said Proust has already gotten to Andrew, but I can stop him from doing it anymore if I go. I told Riko to bring Proust to Evermore with me as insurance."

Aaron's eyes went wide.

"You're kidding," He said, " What are you smoking Wesninski? You really think—"

"I need you to cover for me," Neil said, " The others won't let me go, and I suck at lying. I need you to cover for me."

"No."

"Aaron—"

"I said no!" Aaron said, " Why would you go? This doesn't make sense. Andrew won't care that you did this for him."

"I don't care what he thinks!" Neil says. "I care that he doesn't get hurt."

"He won't like—"

"I don't care! And I know you didn't care either when you fired that bullet into Drake! Now Andrew's living that hell all over again, and he's alone and he's vulnerable. I'm terrified to go back, but I won't put Andrew through that if I can do something about it! I'm going either way, but it will be easier, and safer if you are covering for me. Will you help?"

Aaron looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. Neil didn't blame him. Neil was asking Aaron to basically assist in a suicide mission.

Aaron swallowed, "Let me think about it."

And then Aaron went to lay down for bed.

Chapter 31

Neil didn't sleep. He curled up while wearing Andrew's hoodie in the window, and smoking the last of Andrew's cigarettes. His hands shook. His head ached. His mind reeled.

When the early morning rays of light crested to horizon, bathing the campus in a warm light that was as foreboding as it was beautiful, Neil got up and began to pack his bag.

His hands didn't stop shaking the entire time. And he didn't bother to pack much in the way of clothes, the Ravens won't let him wear clothes anyways. Instead he packed bandages, dental floss, a lighter, needles, and some alcohol. Among other things he might need to put his, soon to be, broken body back together again.

"It's like you're preparing for war," Aaron's voice says. But the tone is different than it was the night before.

"It's more like preparing to be a prisoner of war," Neil said weakly.

Aaron didn't respond. Neil was damn near close to breaking down.

"How are you doing this?" Aaron asked.

Neil took the moment to be a smartass when it rose, needing to grasp at that fight he still had in him.

"Well it's actually quite simple," Neil said, "I simply put the items in the bag and when I'm done I zip it closed."

"That's not what I meant," Aaron said. But he didn't sound put off by Neil's attitude like normal.

"What do you mean then?" Neil asked.

"I mean, how do you just stand up for all of them? How do you just go back for Andrew? I don't understand. That place was Hell for you, so why?" Aaron said.

Neil thought about his answer as he pulled out some clothes to change into.

"I'm nothing," Neil said. Because that's how he'd always answer when people ask him that question. His own worth was unimportant. "I've always been nothing. I'm worthless, used, disgusting, and something that probably shouldn't exist."

"Neil—"

But Neil cuts Aaron off," But the foxes make me feel like I'm worth *something* . And if going back to Evermore is what it takes to keep that alive then I'll pay it. Because I want to know what it feels like to be someone. I don't want to be nothing anymore."

Aaron was silent at that, his eyes trained on the ground. Neil threw off his shirt and shucked off his pants. And changed into the clothes he'd set out for himself only moments prior.

Neil was still unsure what to say to the foxes when he came face to face with them. Wasn't sure how he was going to explain his absence. Neil was glad the girls had already left for their destinations earlier that morning. Neil didn't think he could lie to Renee at all.

"Are you ready to go?" Matt asked, glancing at Neil with a smile.

Aaron stood beside Neil, a suitcase in hand. He was still staring at the floor.

Neil hesitated.

"I... uh... I-"

"He's not coming with us," Aaron said pushing out what sounded like an annoyed huff of air, "He's all nervous about it even though I told him it'd be fine and we'd understand."

Neil glanced at Aaron.

"Is something wrong?" Seth asked. His face was concerned when Neil turned to look at him, and Neil suddenly felt more awful about having to lie to them.

Would they ever forgive him for this?

Aaron huffed at Neil's pause, and gave an answer Neil wasn't expecting.

"He wants to pay respects to his mother," Aaron said, "We talked about moms last night, and he was talking about how he never got to pay her respects while he was at Evermore."

It was a gamble to say that. Afterall Kevin and Jean would be able to know if Neil had ever gone to pay respects. But the truth was, Aaron was right.

Kevin, Jean, Nicky, Seth, and Matt all stared at each other. Then Jean spoke.

"I thought you didn't know where she was buried?" Jean asks.

"I know the last place I spent with her alive," Neil said, "California."

There was a moment of silence. Then Aaron spoke again.

"I told him he should use this break to go say goodbye and stuff," Aaron said, "He's concerned about leaving us. Especially since he's been standing in for Andrew."

Seth was the first to react, "Alright let's just point out that Andrew isn't the only one who can kick ass here," Seth says. "They've got Matt and I. Plus Nicky isn't just some pushover. If you want to go pay your respects you do it man!"

Neil's stomach bottomed out with guilt. Luckily Kevin took it as guilt for leaving him.

"Jean and I will be okay Abram," Kevin said.

And Neil knew that. He knew they'd be okay because Riko would be too busy with him to hurt any of them. Aaron seemed to know it too. His shoulders were tense, and his jaw set in a way that made him look even more like Andrew than he already did.

Neil hoped they forgave him for this. He really did.

"Thank you guys," Neil said with a tired smile.

And when they beamed at him, his heart broke.

Neil rode with them to the airport. His flight didn't take off until two hours after theirs did, so he waited with them at their gate. Telling them he'd go to his gate when they left.

He heard their flight being boarded, and got up to accept the hugs, and fist bumps they offered. Aaron was the last to leave, waiting for the others to leave earshot before he spoke.

"You tell Riko that if you don't check in with me daily I go to Coach," Aaron said.

"Aaron—"

"No!" Aaron said fiercely. "Everyday. You call me."

"You won't like what you hear," Neil said.

"I don't care, Wesninski," Aaron said.

Neil swore he heard the slightest tremor to Aaron's voice.

"Okay," Neil responded.

"Promise me you're coming back," Aaron said. "Promise."

It was strange having that come from Aaron's mouth as opposed to Andrew's. Neil almost wished it was Andrew making him promise again. A firm solid demand for Neil to hold tight to.

"I promise," Neil said.

For now, he'd give his promise to Aaron's shaky prayer.

The others had boarded the plane already, and the lady at the door was looking at Aaron impatiently.

Aaron pulled Neil into a hug. "Everyday Wesninski."

"I understand."

To Andrew

I'm boarding my plane. I promise I'm doing this as safely as possible. I have one of the foxes who I'm checking in with daily.

Riko stood in front of Castle Evermore when Neil arrived. Reacher stood by his side. Neil walked stiffly towards them.

"Where's Proust?" Neil asked.

He needed to see him. Needed to be sure coming here wasn't for nothing. But instead of seeing him, Neil heard him.

"Right here Baby boy," Neil heard Proust's voice and then felt his arm snake around Neil's waist. Neil tensed, and his stomach churned.

"I have a teammate who knows I'm here," Neil said, "I check in with them everyday or they go to my Coach. That's everyday Raven time."

Neil had messaged Aaron about the Raven time difference. Neil had told Aaron that if Aaron didn't receive a call at least once every Raven day, then Aaron could get Coach and tell the others.

Riko grit his teeth at this information. And Proust's arm got tighter around Neil's waist.

"It's quite alright Riko," Proust says, "We still have plenty of time."

Neil cringed at that, but he didn't put up a fight as he was pulled into the Nest.

"Neil, are you alright?"

"Yeah Aaron, I'm okay."

"You don't sound okay."

"I just got my throat destroyed by the entire Raven's lineup... that might be the reason."

"That's not fine."

"It's fine for me."

"Nate, it's time to play."

"I have to go Aaron."

"Neil, wait!"

"I'll call you tomorrow."

To Andrew

I hope you are doing alright. Proust is here so I know he isn't hurting you. I've checked in with my co-conspirator already. I'll keep my promise to you. I'll be the first one you see.

"Neil!"

"Hey Aaron, how's New York?"

"You sound worse than yesterday."

"Trust me I look just as bad."

"Neil—"

"Tell me about New York Aaron. Tell me anything. Just don't ask me about here."

"...okay."

To Andrew

It sounds like everyone is having a good time on their breaks. I know Riko won't hurt them while I'm here. I can at least have that piece of mind.

"Neil!"

"Aaron."

"Neil you have to let me get you out of there—"

"If I leave, Andrew gets hurt."

"Neil this is so much—"

"No."

"Can I at least walk you through how to patch yourself up."

Neil didn't need Aaron to, but if it made Aaron feel better...

"Alright."

To Andrew

I'm tired of being nothing. The foxes make me feel like something. I'm holding onto that. I swear I am.

"Neil."

"..."

"Neil, talk to me."

"I'm fine... I'm okay."

"Neil—"

"Talk to me."

"Okay... okay... what about?"

"Anything but here."

To Andrew

I was with Tetsuji the whole day today. I didn't call him Master once. It cost me though. But I don't care. I won't call him Master ever again.

"Neil."

"Talk to me."

"Okay."

To Andrew

I feel like I'm going crazy. When I'm not practicing, getting fucked, or checking in I'm being kept in a dark room. They keep it so cold in there. I can handle it though, I'm fine.

"Neil?"

"If I ever say the word please when I'm out of here, I want you to stab me."

"Andrew will probably do it for me."

To Andrew

If I ever say please again. I want you to kill me.

"Neil."

"Aar—"

"Neil are you okay?"

"Finish your phone call Baby Boy, I'll entertain myself."

"Neil—"

"You should hang up Aaron."

"No. You focus on me. Listen to me talk, okay?"

"Tell me about New York."

"Okay."

To Andrew

New York sounds fun. I'd like to go someday.

"Aaron."

"I'm here Neil."

"Please tell me I'm worth something."

"To so many people. Seth asked about you today. Asked if I'd heard from you. Asked if you were alright. "

"I hope you lied and said I was fine."

"I said that you said you were fine."

"What'd he say to that?"

"That you were probably dying."

To Andrew

I miss the foxes. I miss having a choice.

"Neil."

"I'm here."

"You're breathing hard!"

"I have a fever."

"How high?"

"102. Proust is giving me medicine."

"In exchange for what?"

"You don't want that answer."

To Andrew

Let's murder Proust together. After the season if I survive. It'll be fun.

"Neil?"

"Present."

"Why do you sound like that?"

"I'm throwing up so that they aren't in my stomach anymore."

"Do you want to hear about Kevin's drunken confession to Lady Liberty?"

"Sounds more entertaining than the toilet."

To Andrew

Kevin is a dumbass. And we probably need to get rid of his alcohol.

"I don't want this."

"Neil?"

"I don't... I'm not a whore... I don't like what they do to me... I don't want this."

"I believe you."

"Thank you."

To Andrew

*I don't want to be what they call me anymore. I don't want to be here. Make this worth it.
Come home safe.*

"Neil."

"...yeah... I'm here."

"Do you want to talk?"

"No."

"Neil."

"Goodbye."

To Andrew

Proust told me in detail what he did to you. I tried not to listen. I swear. But he... I'm sorry.

"Neil, talk to me today okay?"

"... I can barely speak."

"I'll talk then. You listen."

"Okay."

To Andrew

You have a great brother.

"Neil."

"I'm tired."

"You should get some sleep."

"They won't let me."

"Why are you laughing?"

"Hysteria."

To Andrew

I want to be back in my bed. Wish I had a cigarette.

"One more week Neil."

"I don't think I can make it."

"Neil—"

"I've begged them everyday. I've given in and begged everyday! I'm tired. I'm broken. I'm ruined—"

"No you aren't. You can do this. You promised me. You promised."

"I promised. I promised. I promised."

To Andrew

I keep my promises. I keep them. I promise I will keep my promises.

"Neil– Neil why are you screaming?"

"Everything hurts!!!"

"Neil!"

"Make it end. Please. Just let it end. Please. Please. Please."

"Stop saying that word!"

"I just want it to stop."

"When you come home it will. Just hang in until then."

"...okay."

To Andrew

I made a promise. I will keep my promise.

"Neil?"

"They want me to sign a contract. I won't do it. I swear—"

"I believe you."

"It hurts Aaron. There is so much blood. I don't want to go back to the bathtub again. I don't want to go back to the room. I don't want to see Proust anymore."

"I'm sorry Neil."

"I'm so tired."

"Get some rest."

To Andrew

I'm tired. I'm so tired.

"Neil, Seth got a pro offer today."

"He deserves it. He worked hard."

"That's because of you Neil."

"He could have done it without me."

"Neil—"

"Goodbye."

To Andrew

I want to go home.

"Neil."

"I want to die."

"Neil."

"I'm in a lot of pain."

"Neil."

"I can barely move. They told me that Reacher is driving me back. I can't. Aaron..."

"Neil—"

"Goodbye."

To Andrew

Reacher is going to drive me back. So even after I was supposed to get out... I won't be out.

"I tried to overdose."

"Neil—"

"Proust saved my life."

"Neil—"

"He said I owed him."

"Neil—"

"Why are you crying?"

"I never should have let you go."

To Andrew

I almost broke my promise. I'm sorry. But I'll keep it. I swear. I just wasn't... I wasn't okay for a second.

From Aaron

Neil you missed Check-in

From Aaron

Neil!

From Aaron

Neil, I told Kevin. He called someone.

From Aaron

Neil. We need you here.

"You ready to go Nate?" Riko's face appeared in Neil's vision, and Neil shook uncontrollably. His body hurt. His fever was at 103. He was tired.

He was so damn tired.

"Reacher is going to take you home now Baby Boy," Proust said.

Neil was out of it. Nothing made sense. He was too tired to scream in pain as they carried him outside to the cars roughly. But when they halted in their progress, Neil managed to look up.

A familiar figure stood in all her glory outside the nest.

"Thea," Riko glared.

"Give me Nathaniel Riko," Thea said dangerously, "He's coming with me. His time with you is up."

Neil didn't hear much after that. He felt Thea take him to her car. But he knew one thing.

He was out.

He'd done it.

He was never going back.

"Take me to Coach Wymack's," Neil said in pain.

"Are you going to be okay for 5 hours of driving?"

"It isn't five hours of the nest," Neil's breath came out ragged. "I will survive."

"Try and get some sleep," Thea said.

But Neil was already drifting into unconsciousness.

Chapter 32

When Neil awoke, he was in pain. For a moment he thought he was still in the nest, but then he heard the motor of the car. Then Neil remembered Thea. Neil internally groaned, both in pain and in annoyance.

Thea was a backliner for the US Olympic Court, and one hell of a powerful female. Not to mention Kevin's long term girlfriend, and Neil's overprotective and self proclaimed adopted mom.

Thea wasn't going to let him go without chewing him out for this.

Back when Thea had been at Edgar Allan, Thea was one of the only people who stepped in when she could. She couldn't get there all the time, the perfect court was separated from the rest of the team. But she did what she could.

And what she *could* do, was often chew Neil out for being stupid. She truly was the mom friend of the group, and now Neil was stuck in the car with her while he looked half dead. He truly doubted she'd simply let his return to the nest drop without her calling him a dumbass.

So Neil did the only thing he had the ability to do at that moment. He pretended to be asleep.

It lasted for all of ten minutes before Thea's voice sounded.

"You're not fooling me with that bullshit sleeping act," Thea said.

"Goddamnit," Neil muttered, and he winced at how wrecked his voice was.

Thea reached under her seat, eyes never leaving the road, and pulled out a package of cough drops. She threw it at Neil and then returned to gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Neil could see her knuckles turning white as she drove.

"You... seem... upset?" Neil said, trying to start a conversation.

Thea sent Neil a glare that definitely froze hell, and Neil shrank back.

"Yes Nathaniel!" Thea said, "I *am* pretty fucking upset. You know, Kevin hasn't called me once since he left the nest. Not once—"

"That sounds like a Kevin problem," Neil says, trying to deflect her rage at Kevin.

"No Nathaniel," Thea holds up her hand. Her eyes were wide with rage, and her voice had a fake happy lilt to it. But Neil could feel her rage. "Because not only did he ignore me, but so did Jean after he left the nest. And then after Kengo died, I couldn't even get a hold of *you* !"

"Riko took my—"

"I am *not* done!"

Neil's mouth clamps shut again.

"So I worry about you for months. MONTHS!!! And I am unable to get a hold of anyone. And then I see you, after *everyone* left me in the dark for *ages* , playing with the Palmetto Foxes. Completely safe!"

"But that's good right?" Neil asked. "See I'm safe so there is no need for—"

"Then last night Kevin, who I've not heard from in forever, fucking calls me, and tells me THAT YOU WENT BACK!?"

Neil winced. "Oh."

So that's why she was mad.

"OH?" Thea shouts, "All I get... is an 'OH'?"

Neil winced again. "In my defense," Neil said, "After Kengo died Riko took my phone. And I couldn't remember your number for my new one."

Thea glared, "That's not even remotely the problem here! Have you seen yourself?"

"I've been avoiding clawing my own skin off, so no. I haven't." Neil said.

"You look like you were hit by a fucking train, Nathaniel! You look fucking DEAD!!! For a second I thought you were when I picked you up!!! Do you know how completely motionless you were while they dragged you!?" Thea lays into Neil like their lives depended on it.

"I'm obviously alive," Neil responded, "Otherwise we wouldn't be speaking."

Thea glares at Neil. But when she sees Neil shrink back she sighs.

"How's your fever?" Thea asks, "I had to stop earlier and get medicine down your throat. You were at 103.5."

Neil touches his forehead, but obviously couldn't get a great read with his own hand. He shrugs, "It must be better, I'm not as delirious."

Thea sighs, "I also stitched you up a bit too. The worst ones at least. The rest weren't bad enough for me to worry about. Your team physician can take care of the rest when we get there."

"She won't have time," Neil says. He glances down at his bag, making sure it was still there. He reaches his hand into the pocket and pulls out a slip of paper. "I have to get to Easthaven tonight, and get Andrew out of there."

Thea's gaze snaps over to Neil, "You went for the goalkeeper!?"

Neil's gaze remains on the paper. Proust had signed it while bending Neil over a table. Release forms, saying that Andrew met all of Proust's requirements for leaving. It should have been signed two weeks ago, but Proust had refrained from doing so.

Neil knew the note would still be good for the next day too. But Neil didn't want to leave Andrew there with the knowledge that Proust could be back as early as the end of the day. As it was, Neil was already stretching time by going back to get Wymack. But Neil didn't want to risk getting to Easthaven, and then not being allowed to check Andrew out.

"Neil!" Thea said loudly, pulling Neil from his thoughts, "Why did you go?"

"Proust had Andrew, I couldn't just—"

"So you *did* go for the goalkeeper? Why Neil? Why do you keep doing this? You are worth just as much as anyone else is!" Thea said.

"What would you do if it was Kevin!?" Neil snaps back.

Thea's eyes go wide. Something flickers in her gaze, something knowing.

"So it's like that then?" Thea asks. Neil isn't sure if the tone in her voice is wonder, or understanding. But either way it's confusing.

"Like what?" Neil asks, confused.

Thea stares at Neil another moment, before sighing and shaking her head, "Nevermind. I forgot how obtuse you are."

"What?"

"It's something you have to figure out on your own," Thea says.

Neil frowns, before pushing the conversation to the side.

Thea hits a pothole, and Neil groans in pain as it jostled him around.

"Sorry," Thea says, wincing.

"It's fine," Neil gasps out. Thea gives him an unimpressed look. "How far are we?"

Thea sighs, seeming to realize that she wouldn't be getting anything out of Neil in terms of honest emotions.

She'd tried for years, but Neil didn't want to impress his mental state on anybody. Even the cracks he showed the foxes were nothing compared to what he actually held inside himself. The panic attacks he couldn't control. His blunt answers about wanting to die were hidden behind a smile so people would take it more as a joke.

Neil thought about his conversations with Andrew, and how Andrew had seen more than anybody ever had. He'd seen the uglier parts of Neil and hadn't even batted a single eye.

"We are about thirty minutes out," Thea said, breaking through Neil's musings. "You should call your coach. Tell him to be ready with a car so you can make it to that Goalie of yours in time."

Neil nods, it was a good idea. Neil pulled out his phone and dialed Wymack.

Wymack picked up in moments, and Neil could hear Abby and Betsy in the background laughing.

"Wesninski," Wymack said, "Is someone dead?"

Neil barely repressed the urge to roll his eyes.

"No coach," Neil said. He was thankful the throat lozenge helped to make his voice sound almost normal, "I'm thirty minutes away from your apartment, I need you to drive me to Easthaven. We are picking up Andrew."

Neil hears Wymack's sputtering, and ends the call.

He turns back to Thea, who was raising her eyebrow at him. "Are you not going to warn him about any other part of this?" Thea asked gesturing to Neil's entire broken form.

"Wouldn't Kevin have done it?" Neil asked.

"You really think Kevin remembered to do that before drinking after finding out where you went?" Thea asked incredulously.

Neil sighed, " I mean at least he has his priorities straight."

Thea flicks Neil's ear," Call your Coach back and warn him."

"Listen if he sees I'm already half dead I have a feeling he's less likely to kill me himself."
Neil responded.

At that moment Wymack's name flashes across his phone screen.

"Hello?" Neil answers.

"Listen you little bastard," Wymack said," Explain."

"No time," Neil responded. "Just get the car ready."

Neil hung up again.

Thea sighed," Somehow I have a feeling he's just going to kill you anyways."

Thirty minutes later they pulled up at Wymack's apartment building. Neil caught a glimpse of the three adults in a huddle around Wymack's truck. None of them paid any mind to Thea's car, likely not recognizing it.

Neil's side was the side facing away from the adults. And Neil thanked his lucky stars for that blessing, because when he tried to get out of the car himself he crumpled to the ground like tissue paper.

Thea rushed around the car and helped Neil stand. And Neil cursed the fact that he was wearing shorts and a t-shirt in the frigid December weather.

Neil stood for two seconds before crumpling again. He breathed heavily. And chanced a glance over at the adults. They were still engrossed in their conversation. Neil grabbed his bag from the floor of the car, and slung it over his shoulder. Taking hold of the paper in his hand.

Thea stood back, allowing Neil the space. But not offering support unless Neil wanted it, or needed it.

Neil got to his feet one more time, wobbling a bit like a newborn deer.

"I'm gonna need help," Neil laughs slightly. And Thea instantly has Neil leaning his weight against her. The adults all had their backs to them, turned in towards the car. So Neil made it within five feet of them before Abby turned around.

Abby had been holding a stack of papers, but when she turned her grip turned slack. And the heavy stack thumped to the ground. The breeze scattering the papers all over.

Neil hoped they weren't important.

Abby's mouth moved like it wanted to form words, but then she settled for a hand over her mouth. Betsy turned next, looking at Abby and then following her gaze to Neil.

Betsy was normally so good at keeping her reactions tempered. But her face showed nothing but horror upon seeing Neil's form. Wymack hadn't caught the thump, he'd been half distracted by his phone. But when he realized the conversation had petered off, and when he'd seen the Women's expressions, he'd finally turned to see Neil.

"Ready to go?" Neil asked, throwing his arms out.

Thea kept him stable, but the motion of lifting his arms had Neil crumpling yet again, his breathing ragged.

The reaction seemed to spur Abby into motion. She sprang forward and was reaching for Neil's face.

Neil allowed Abby to inspect it.

"Neil," Wymack breathed out, "Jesus kid! Have you even looked at yourself? How are you breathing?"

"I'm pretty sure my lungs expand and contract, taking in oxygen and throwing out Carbon Dioxide." Neil said with a huff. "We don't have time for this, we need to—"

Neil pushed away from Thea in a stupid attempt to play strong. But he sprawled onto the ground moments later.

"You dumbass," Thea ground out. "If you're going to do stupid shit like going back to Evermore, then you'd better be ready to accept help afterwards! Stop pretending to be fine!"

"He *what* !?" Wymack ground out.

The sound made Neil flinch. Neil threw his arms over his face, before remembering that Wymack would never hit him. And when he lowered them, all three adults were staring at him in horror.

Neil winced, and forced out a laugh, "Thea I might need you to drive me to a graveyard so I can dig a grave for Coach to bury me in."

Neil's laugh hurt him though, and he forced himself to swallow.

"Are we done?" Neil asked, " Because we really need to go get Andrew."

"Neil," Betsy said gently, but her voice was shaking, " I know you may want to get him out, but he still needs one more—"

Neil cut her off, and handed her the signed document. It was only a copy. The real one was still with Proust, and another copy had been faxed to the hospital. Betsy's eyes scanned the document, and her eyes snapped to Neil.

"You can't act like you know this," Neil said weakly, " They'll kill you all if they think you have become loose ends."

He waits until the adults nod.

Neil swallows, "Proust used to work at Evermore... There's a reason I hated shrinks and didn't trust you. Riko made me a deal for Andrew's safety."

Betsy's hands clench around the paper, in a surprising lack of calmness.

"I promised Andrew to be the first person he saw," Neil says quietly, " Proust will be getting back from Evermore tonight... I don't want what I did to be worthless so—"

Neil catches himself before he can say the word please.

"We need to go," Neil said.

Abby had her head in her hands, and Betsy is still clutching the paper tightly in her hands.

"If we take the bus I can patch him up on the way over," Abby says.

"We don't have—"

"Neil," Betsy says firmly, "This is non-negotiable. Abby either checks you on the ride there, saving time. Or she does so here."

"Okay," Neil says quietly. "Alright. Let's go get the bus. But let's just... let's hurry."

Bee and Abby help Neil stand and get into the truck. And to Neil's surprise, Thea hops into Wymack's truck too before they can pull away. Thea holds out the stack of papers Abby had dropped, and Abby thanks her.

Wymack pulls out of the parking spot, and speeds away.

Chapter 33

Abby and Betsy set to work once on the bus, and Thea helped when she could. They set blankets and pillows down in the aisle of the bus. Neil didn't know where they'd gotten them. But he figured it must have been when Abby grabbed her med kit.

Thea sat down on the ground, and then Neil laid back against her chest. She kept her arms linked around Neil's waist, helping to support him. Abby went to pull Neil's shirt off, but Neil resisted.

"Neil," Betsy said, "You agreed to let Abby help on the ride there. This is important."

Neil felt like he was in too much pain to be that vulnerable though. He knew it was stupid because he *knew* no one there would hurt him. But still...

"Can it wait till Andrew's here?" Neil asked. "I'll let you work on anything else, but can the shirt wait?"

Betsy bit her lip and looked at Abby. Abby sighed. "I'll save that for the ride back then."

Abby started with Neil's legs, luckily nothing was broken. But the bruises covering them both would not lead anyone to believe that. Abby worked her way up, and Neil focused on Betsy's face instead of looking when Abby got to Neil's thighs.

She paused, and Neil knew why. Proust was a biter. He enjoyed leaving the marks of his teeth all over Neil's body, even going so far as drawing blood. There were plenty on Neil's lower thigh alone, but Abby could likely see how they made a trail up to Neil's upper thighs, which were hidden by his shorts.

"Do I need to do anything down here?" Abby asks, gesturing to Neil's lower half which was still covered.

Neil bit his lip, because there was no question that Abby would. But he still didn't want to.

"That can wait too," Betsy said, "Until we are somewhere more private."

Neil nodded gratefully, and then gave Abby his arms for her to check over.

Abby and Betsy both sucked in a breath. At first Neil thought they were reacting to the old suicide scars, but then he remembered the newest wounds on his arms.

Neil remembered somehow getting into Riko's stash of drugs after Riko had left the room for a moment. Neil had poured what he could down his throat, before slashing at his arms with a knife.

Riko had been furious, and immediately got Proust.

Now his arms would have five vertical scars each. They each screamed of vicious intent to end his own life. Neil didn't know if it was because he knew his emotions at the time, or because truly the way the cut sat on his arm gave them away. It was as if the jagged line screamed every second of the hopelessness he'd felt in that moment.

"Neil—"

"Don't," Neil choked out, cutting Abby off.

When Neil had finally been left alone for the night, locked in that dark cold room, he'd broken. He'd tugged at his hair as silent tears rolled down his face. A vulnerability he never showed anyone, and a vulnerability he rarely let surface.

But he'd been torn in so many directions. He found himself glad he was saved, because he didn't want to break his promises. Especially not his promise to Andrew. But with that gladness that he was saved, came a sick feeling of gratitude to Proust for saving him. It was disgusting. On the heels of that was sadness that he hadn't escaped. Behind that was anger that Proust took his body as payment. Rage followed that because, why did everyone think Neil's body was theirs to use. And finally there was emptiness and hopelessness. Neil had cried for only ten minutes before petering into a vacant stare at the wall.

"I gave him some pain meds around four hours ago," Thea said from behind Neil. And Neil didn't know if she was trying to help by changing the subject. Or if she was trying to help Abby focus on Neil's treatment, "It was mainly to help with his fever, but it took the edge off the pain I think."

Neil winced at that. If this was how it felt with the edge off the pain, he was not looking forward to the full extent.

Abby redid the stitches on Neil's arms. Neil thought they looked fine. But once Neil had said Proust was the one to do them, Abby had undone the stitches and redone them herself.

Neil didn't say it, but the fact that they were Abby's stitches now, and not Proust's, made Neil's skin crawl a little less.

When they got to Easthaven, the sky was already beginning to darken somewhat. The sight made Neil's stomach twist, and despite the pain he was off the bus and stumbling towards the doors of the hospital. Ignoring the yells of the others behind him.

Abby was the first to catch up to Neil's slow stumble. Wymack came up right next to her, and they both helped support him into the building. Neil's sure they were turning heads all over the place, but he was more focused on his goal.

"Remember," Neil said, "You can't act like you know anything. They'll take you from me if you—"

"We understand," Betsy said, soothing Neil's hair. "We aren't going anywhere. Now let's go get Andrew."

Neil limped with Wymack and Abby's help to the desk. Betsy walked beside them, and Thea had stayed on the bus per Wymack's request.

"We are here to pick up Andrew Minyard," Neil said, startling the lady sitting at the desk.

The woman stared at Neil, and her eyes went wide.

"Oh my God!" She said, "Sweetie, you need a doctor!"

"Andrew Minyard," Neil repeated, "We are here to pick him up."

The lady sent an incredulous look around to the adults supporting Neil, "Sweetie! You're injured—"

"Andrew Minyard." Neil said.

"But your—"

"Andrew. Minyard." Neil repeated, annunciating each syllable.

Wymack huffed out a laugh next to him before speaking, "He has a one track mind. The sooner we check out Andrew, the sooner we'll convince him to finish his medical attention."

The lady shot them all a look of disbelief before sighing and telling them to sign in. They did so and then they stood and waited.

Eventually a nurse popped out from the back and came up to them.

"He'll be right out," The nurse said with a smile, "He had some 230 messages waiting on his phone from someone, he said he needed to check them. He was probably concerned about them."

Betsy's gaze shifted to Neil, and she raised an eyebrow.

"Whoops," Neil said. "I didn't realize I sent that many."

The nurse looked Neil up and down. "I'd say he was right to be concerned," She said, quirking a brow.

Neil just just stared at her in response. The nurse shrugged and walked away, and so they continued to wait.

Neil's mind wandered, his body begged for him to sit, and Abby even tried to get him into a chair as well. But the truth was that if he sat, Neil didn't think he would stand up again. He was starting to feel the ache and pull of every little muscle. The meds Thea had given him probably were starting to wear off.

Abby offered Neil a chair again. Telling him he should sit. And the pain starting to radiate through him, made him almost accept that offer. But then he heard a familiar name.

"Dr. Proust!" A nurse called, "So good to see you again. How was your vacation?"

Proust hadn't seen him, but Neil was tense all over. He was waiting for the moment to happen. Betsy, Wymack, and Abby were all staring at Neil with horrified looks on their faces.

"Wonderful Jenny!" Proust replied, "I got to see an old acquaintance of mine. A feisty little red head."

"She sounds delightful!" The nurse smiled.

Abby pulled Neil's body tighter against her, and Neil took comfort in the closeness to her. Then Proust looked over and saw him.

"You can't let him know that you know," Neil said panicked as Proust approached.

Neil didn't get to see the adults' reactions to his words, he pushed away from Wymack and Abby, stumbling slightly. But he managed to stand by himself on shaking legs. Wymack and Abby didn't let him get far from them though. They stood a foot away each, and were ready to catch him if he fell.

"Nathaniel!" Proust says with a grin that twisted Neil's stomach. Proust pulled Neil into a hug, and took the chance to sniff Neil's hair.

"I'm sorry," Betsy says, interrupting the moment, she pulls Neil slightly out of the way and sticks out her hand as a guise of wanting to introduce herself, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Betsy."

Proust stares at Betsy appraisingly, and then smiles charmingly like a manipulative snake, "I am Dr. Proust. I used to be Neil's old therapist before he left the Ravens. He was my favorite patient."

There was no way that Betsy didn't feel the way Neil's entire body was trembling next to her.

Neil had seen Proust just that morning. The man's face was twisted into a sick grin of pleasure as he left bite marks all over Neil's body. To see him acting charming and pretending to be a good guy, had Neil's stomach reeling.

Proust turned to Neil and looked him up and down, ignoring Betsy.

"You are looking a bit rough Nathaniel," Proust grabs Neil's wrist roughly. And Neil winced as his hand wrapped directly around the tearing from the cuffs. "It seems you are feeling a bit rough too lately. My office is always open for you. Speaking of which, why don't we take you back and see if one of the nurses can patch you up."

"There's no need," Betsy smiles, "Neil has me and Abby to take care of him. I promise you he's in good hands."

Proust nods, and then begins pointing at Neil and snaps his fingers, "Ah! that's right," Proust says, "You went to Palmetto. You must be here for Andrew. Let me go see what's taking him so long. I'll tell him he should get a move on."

Neil froze. The others tensed, but Neil isn't sure if they heard the threat he did, or if they just didn't want Proust near Andrew in general.

But Neil heard the threat.

Him or you.

Proust began to walk, and Neil held up a hand to grab his sleeve. He evaded the grabs of Abby, Wymack, and Betsy and instead fell into Proust's.

Neil's skin crawled and he felt disgusting as Proust helped Neil to stay standing.

"I could use..." Neil trailed off, not wanting to do this again, but he swallowed, "I could use the medical attention."

Proust threw an arm around Neil's shoulder. "Excellent!" Then Proust called over to the three adults who were watching damn near horrified and white in the face. All three frantically search for an answer that wouldn't give away what they knew. "We might be a while," Proust says.

Neil wanted to cry, to break. But he had to be strong just a bit longer.

Hands on his body.

Just a bit longer.

Lips on his neck.

Just a bit longer.

Groans in his ear.

Just a bit—

Just as Proust goes to open the door that would shut Neil off from his group, a strong grip wraps around Neil's arm and yanks him back. Neil yelps in pain and in surprise as he falls into a firm muscled chest. His arms land on broad shoulders to steady himself. A firm but gentle grasp was settled in his hair, pressing his face into the person's neck. He breathed in and caught a familiar scent. And instantly he broke.

He didn't have to be strong with this person. For a moment Neil could break and he'd be okay, as long as this person was here.

"Just so we're clear," Andrew's voice was steady, unheeded by drugs. He didn't yell, but he didn't need to. His normal speaking voice got the threat across clear enough. "If you touch him again... I will kill you right now."

At the sound of that voice, Neil's body gives out. There's the sound of a bag hitting the floor, and then Andrew's other hand is around Neil's waist, keeping Neil upright. Neil feels everything in that moment. The pain. The fear. The sadness. And he allows a quiet but broken shudder of breath to leave him against Andrew's neck as the tears start to fall. Neil feels the arm around his waist tighten. And Neil let's out a quiet but pained noise. The grip loosened.

"I'm sad to see you go Andrew," Proust says, and a hand touches Neil's back. The hand was gone in seconds and Andrew's hand on Neil's head had left.

"I said," Andrew said, "Do. Not. Touch. Him."

There was a moment of silence and then, "Then I guess I'll be going again... It was fun Baby Boy."

Neil let out a harsh choked sob at that. His breathing was irregular.

He had never cried in front of anyone before this moment, much less on someone. But Neil felt safe. He felt like he was home. And when Andrew went to pull away, Neil panicked.

"Don't let them see me like this!" Neil panicked into Andrew's neck. His fists clenched into the fabric of Andrew's shirt.

Andrew was tense. And Neil resigned himself to pushing away, and just having to be seen in that moment of weakness. He didn't want to push Andrew's boundaries when Andrew made such an effort to protect Neil's.

Neil went to push away, but Andrew's hand pressed him back into the blonde's neck.

"Stay," Andrew said, "Yes or no? Carrying you."

It would be painful, but walking would have been painful as well. Already Neil was feeling the onset of the full scale of pain.

"Yes," Neil said.

"One arm will be under your thighs. The other around your lower back. Still a yes?" Andrew explained and questioned.

"Yes."

"Put your arms around my neck, don't choke me," Andrew said.

Neil did as Andrew told him, keeping his face buried in Andrew's neck. And with no effort at all, Andrew picked him up and carried him.

"I kept my promise," Neil said through tears.

Andrew's grip around him tightened.

"I hate you."

"I know."

"Andrew, you forgot your bag," Abby said.

"Good. Throw it away. Burn it. I don't care." Andrew responded.

Andrew didn't slow as he carried Neil. Neil felt himself becoming increasingly tired.

"You have a fever," Andrew said as he climbed the steps to the bus.

Neil laughed weakly, "The meds must have worn off."

As Neil said that, a sharp jolt of pain shot through him like a rocket.

Neil let out a sharp sob, luckily it was muffled by Andrew's neck.

"I'll get him some more meds," Abby said, "Go sit on our little nest we created. He wanted to wait until you got here to take off his shirt."

Andrew sat down and readjusted Neil so that he was more comfortable. But the change in position jostled every injury and Neil let out a scream of pain. Andrew froze, and Neil could hear everyone else freeze as well.

Neil trembled, his body shaking in exertion. Neil breathed heavily.

Neil's entire body screamed in pain. And Neil could only manage to let out quiet whimpers. Andrew held him steady. Protecting Neil in his vulnerable state, shelling him away from the eyes that likely had begun to settle.

"Don't let go," Neil muttered. Quiet so that only Andrew could hear.

"Don't say stupid things," Andrew responded. But his grip tightened.

"Neil," Abby's voice was soothing. "I'm going to give you some really strong pain medication okay? It's going to make you tired."

Neil let out another sharp cry of pain as another flare of pain shot through him. "Okay," He said. His voice sounded out of breath.

Neil felt Abby take his arm, and he felt her push a syringe in. He trembled against Andrew for another fifteen minutes before the pain began to ebb away and Neil finally managed to come back to himself.

Andrew told the others to turn their backs when Neil had to remove his shirt, and Andrew's eyes stayed on Neil's face the whole time, never straying down. When Neil's shirt was off, Andrew pulled Neil back into his neck. Neil wove out the final waves of his tears there until Abby had him flip so she could do his front. By then Neil's tears had dried, but still Andrew acted as his anchor.

Neil drooped tiredly against Andrew. The blonde was silent.

"When is someone going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Coach Wymack asked.

Neil didn't respond, already too tired to figure out what he meant. But Andrew did.

"Out of your pay grade coach." Andrew responded.

When they got to the dorms, Thea gave Neil a hug.

"Are you sure you won't stay till Kevin comes back?" Neil asked.

"As much as I want to kill him for ghosting me, calling me, and ghosting me yet again, my Coach said I'm needed." Thea responded, "You have my number Nathaniel. You'd better use it."

"I will," Neil responded. Thea hugged Neil once more before going back to the bus so the Wymack could drop her off at her car back at his apartment.

Abby put a hand on Neil's shoulder, and handed Andrew a pill bottle.

"He needs to take one every six hours," Abby said, "At least until the pain is more manageable. Neil you try to keep that fever down with Tylenol and stuff. Tomorrow I'll drop by, with antibiotics, I'll bring Betsy with me."

Neil nodded.

Betsy stepped forward and gestured to Neil's arm. "Due to those you know I have to put you on Suicide watch right?"

Neil nodded, he'd figured as much when she'd seen them.

"Andrew, don't let him have any sharp objects and you're in charge of his medicine until I clear him." Betsy says, "I figure you wouldn't trust anyone else."

Andrew doesn't respond. He gives no noticeable response to the statement. But Betsy smiles after a moment, and then follows the others onto the bus.

Andrew and Neil watch as the bus pulls out of the lot, and then Neil turns to Andrew.

"We need to go to the store," Neil said, "I smoked all your cigarettes."

Andrew's gaze remained looking where the bus had been for a moment longer, before letting his eyes slide over to Neil.

"I hate you."

"I know."

Andrew and Neil ended up going to the store. Andrew bought new bedding for his bed, and they loaded up their cart with food. The pain meds Abby gave Neil were strong, and Neil was able to get by by leaning on the cart for support. Andrew kept close though, never more than an arm length away from Neil.

When they got back to the dorm, Andrew didn't let Neil try to carry any of the stuff. Neil made a grab for it. But Andrew gave him an unimpressed look before taking the bags and slamming the trunk.

"Do us both a favor and stop making my life harder," Andrew said. Gone was his medicated smile. And instead was a face of bored apathy. Yet it was also a face of steadiness. The calm in the storm of Neil's life.

"Where would be the fun in that?" Neil said grinning.

Andrew glanced at Neil a few more seconds. His hand came up, and Neil nodded a yes. His hand dropped onto Neil's neck, and his thumb brushed against a sore spot on Neil's neck.

"Get showered," Andrew said, "You and I are playing our game afterwards."

Together they made their way up to their dorm.

Chapter 34

Neil had been avoiding mirrors since a particular night in the nest. Riko had held Neil's face up, forcing him to look in the mirror as he was fucked. Whispering how disgusting Neil was into his ear.

Neil hadn't been able to look in a mirror since. He certainly hadn't meant to do it before he showered either. But he had forgotten which side the mirror was on when he walked into the bathroom. And once he accidentally looked, he couldn't stop.

Neil now knew why everyone looked so horrified to see him.

The bite marks on his neck were prominent and vicious, some of them were dried and blood crusted, and bruises had set in. Neil's face had blood and dirt all over it. Bruises lined his jaw. Neil could see the outline of hands on his throat. Neil's bare upper body was worse. Riko had reopened every single scared word and he'd added new ones. "Pet" and "Mine", were written in red uppercase letters. Jagged and Angry. But worst of all was the names carved into him. Thompson, Riko, Proust, Johnson, Reacher. More Raven names littered his skin. And Neil felt like he was falling.

He was theirs.

He was theirs.

He was—

Neil cut the thought off, choking on the gasp that threatened to exit his mouth. He was teetering on an edge. He was going to fall. He wanted— No. Needed their names to be gone, but Andrew had all of Neil's sharp objects.

Andrew.

Neil didn't know if Andrew had seen his upper body yet. Didn't know if Andrew had looked.

"Andrew," Neil choked out. His voice was weak, and Neil didn't know if it had carried to where Andrew was in the window. But Andrew's footsteps sounded and Neil knew it had.

Neil couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. His hands shook, and he tangled them into his curls and pulled hard.

"Andrew what did they do?" Neil trembles. "They're on me."

Because they were. Their names would forever be emblazoned on Neil's skin. Neil's eyes trained down on his arms, and that was a mistake. There were so many bite marks.

So much weakness.

Neil stumbled back as if to get away from his own arms. If he'd had a knife he would have cut his own arms off. Neil's wrists were raw from handcuffs. Neil's vision caught his bare thighs next. Neil had stripped before walking into the bathroom. Even more bite marks, more bruises. Handprints on his torso.

Used.

Broken.

Disgusting.

Neil's eyes catch the mirror again. And he goes to punch the reflection again. But a hand stops his fist and yanks him into a sturdy chest.

"Stop it," Andrew says.

Neil had forgotten he'd called Andrew into the room. He'd forgotten he was naked when he did so.

"Don't look," Neil chokes out.

"I never have," Andrew responds.

That causes Neil to pause. His mind halts. He'd been shirtless around Andrew many times. Andrew had been with the foxes when they all saw Neil shirtless that first time. He'd been shirtless around Andrew on the bus after Kathy's show. Andrew had cleaned Neil up the night Seth had been stabbed. Neil had slipped out of his shirt during Andrew's call with Higgins. Neil had been naked during their entire encounter with Drake. Just that day Neil had taken his shirt off for Abby to work on him as he'd laid against Andrew.

Yet Andrew said he'd never looked. Not even once.

"Why?" Neil asked. Because he can think of no other question to ask.

"The first day I met you," Andrew says, "You told me that since it was your body, you got to consent to who saw it. You said you didn't consent back then. You've never changed your answer. I've never looked."

The moment shines like a bright light through a darkened cavern. It feels like Neil has a rope securing him from falling over that dark cliff.

"I need to shower," Neil finally says.

Andrew doesn't respond. And now as Andrew pulled away, Neil noticed the resolute way that Andrew kept his eyes on the floor, the wall, the ceiling. Anything as long as it wasn't Neil's body without his consent.

It gives Neil the strength to stand up, it gives Neil something to hold onto as he showers until muddy pink and brown water turns clear. It gives him the strength to stand through three washes.

Neil slips into his boxers, and throws on Andrew's hoodie that he'd stolen after he finishes showering. Neil's hair drips into his eyes as he bunches up the sleeves of Andrew's hoodie to look down at his arms.

Andrew had never once peaked, despite the curiosity he'd probably had. Neil didn't want to show Andrew the words covering his torso. Not when Neil still had to learn the locations of all his new brands. But Neil wanted to give Andrew *something* .

Neil found Andrew sitting in the window. And Neil took a seat on the other side. It was the same position they had sat in after Drake. Andrew didn't look at Neil, at least not until Neil got his attention.

"Yes or no?" Neil asks while holding out his hand. Andrew stares at the hand for a moment, before placing his own in Neil's.

Neil didn't move though, because his eyes were caught by something else entirely. Instead of tracking where Neil's hands were, Andrew's eyes were on Neil's face. The act left Neil breathless.

Andrew and Neil were raised in ways that they learned to track the movement of hands and fists. They watched the movements of fingertips to ensure that one wouldn't brush them.

Andrew's hand was in Neil's, but Andrew's eyes were locked onto Neil's face.

It sealed away whatever reservations Neil had about his idea, and Neil took Andrew's hands to Neil's arm.

"You can look," Neil says quietly.

Andrew's eyes tracked Neil's face, as if to make sure. But then Andrew's grip on his arm tightened ever so slightly. And then Andrew looked. Neil knew he saw the bite marks. But Andrew overlooked those, and instead he traced the scars that Neil had done to himself. Neil looked out the window as Andrew inspected them, unable to stomach the bite marks. But Neil turned back at the motion of Andrew slipping off his armbands.

Andrew placed his bare forearm next to Neil's, and Neil stared at their arms side by side.

Andrew didn't have the long vertical scars that Neil had. But he did have the horizontal ones spanning the entire area that Andrew's armbands normally covered. And when Andrew picked up one of Neil's hands to place it on his arm. Neil could see that Andrew's other arm was littered with just as many.

Andrew placed Neil's hand on his arm, miming what Neil had done for him.

"Are you sure?" Neil asked, trying to be sure Andrew wasn't just doing this so that they were even, "You don't—"

"I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't sure," Andrew said, giving Neil a bored look.

Neil allowed his fingertips to run over the scars layering Andrew's forearms. And Andrew's fingers traced over his.

The moment was so surreal, so much like looking in a mirror that Neil had to pause. Normally looking in the mirror was an awful experience; something that Neil tried to avoid as much as he could. Neil looked in a mirror and only saw filth, dirtiness, weakness. But when he looked at Andrew he saw none of that, and Neil couldn't help but stall out at that.

He realized he was staring at Andrew's face when hazel eyes met his own.

"It's like looking in a mirror," Neil said.

Andrew didn't respond, he just stared back at Neil. His face was impassive, but Neil knew Andrew was listening.

"It's like looking in a mirror because we both have been—" Neil didn't know how to say it. Didn't know how to put it. "But normally when I look in a mirror I see all the things they called me... But you're none of that. So why—"

Neil was cut off by a choked noise exiting his own throat.

So why did he feel like this? Why was Neil branded with names, and told he was nothing? Why did he constantly feel like a doll, a toy? Why didn't he ever feel like anything but what they labeled him as?

"Why are you a pillar of strength when I look at you," Neil said, tugging at his own hair" But when I look at myself I'm a doll. *Their* doll."

Andrew's hand had stilled on Neil's arm. He didn't respond.

"They carved their names into me," Neil continued, "They are literally all over me."

Neil began to scratch at his own wrist, where the handcuffs had been.

Theirs. Theirs. Th—

"Stop that," Andrew said.

Again Neil's thoughts halted. He swallowed hard.

"Sorry," He said roughly, "I know you don't have those answers."

Andrew stares at Neil for a moment, "No I don't, but let me know if you ever find the answers."

They sat in silence for another moment. The sky dark, the cold air made Neil burrow further into the sweatshirt he'd stolen from Andrew.

At some point Neil gets up, stumbling to turn on the TV. He changes the channel to the ball drop, and Andrew stares at the screen thoughtfully.

Neil finally grows tired of the silence between them.

"I thought we were going to play our game," Neil says.

Neil was expecting questions about Evermore, or about Proust. But Andrew didn't ask any of those.

"Tell me about your mom," Andrew says.

It threw Neil off a tiny bit. And he stares at Andrew in confusion.

"You aren't going to ask about Evermore?" Neil asks.

"Do you want to talk about Evermore?" Andrew asks.

Neil shakes his head, and Andrew nods.

"I didn't think so," Andrew responds.

So Neil settles back, "You probably wouldn't have liked her much," Neil says, "She beat me when I was too loud, or when I did something dad didn't like. But she tried to get me away from here. Tried to keep me from the nest. She tried to teach me different languages when we were together, that last year. I think it's why I love language so much. Why did you want to ask?"

"Because apparently honoring her memory is where the foxes thought you were all break," Andrew inputs.

Neil winced and Andrew continued, finally leaving the ledge of the window.

"I'm pretty sure I know the answer already," Andrew said, "So if you try to lie, know that I'll gut you. But who was the one clever enough to come up with that little lie you told everyone?"

"That's two questions," Neil says, "Apparently I am clever enough to know that."

"Then accept this one as payment," Andrew responds, "You said Proust told you what he did to me at Easthaven. He told me what he did to you back when you were his patient."

Neil winced.

"Who?" Andrew repeated.

"It was Aaron," Neil responds.

Andrew's jaw clenches, and Neil hurries.

"I would have gone either way," Neil says, " Even if I would've had to sneak out."

"He knew and still let you go!" Andrew says. His voice doesn't raise, but Neil can hear the anger in Andrew's tone.

"None of you would have been able to stop me," Neil snaps back.

"You protecting *me* is not a part of the plan." Andrew grounds out.

"Too bad." Neil responds, " I rewrote it while you were gone. I don't follow your plan, Andrew. And I won't stand by—"

"You will!"

"Not if that means losing you!"

Neil breathes hard. He had raised his voice during that line. Andrew had paused.

"You were the first person to *ever* ask me for my consent. You were the *first* person to give me a choice. The first to follow all of my boundaries! I told you when this started that protecting me wouldn't be easy. I told you I wouldn't just step back and watch. And when I told you I didn't want your protection, you told me that I don't choose who you protect. Well you don't choose who I protect either, and too bad you made the cut."

Andrew's jaw was clenched, but there was something different in Andrew's eyes.

"I hate you," Andrew responds, "You weren't supposed to be real. You were supposed to be a side effect of the drugs."

"I'm not a hallucination," Neil says.

"You're a pipe dream," Andrew said.

"Well if I'm your idea of a fantasy then you've got pretty shitty tastes." Neil smirks. "That sounds like a personal problem."

Andrew stares at Neil for another moment, before striding over to the window, closing it, and heading to bed.

Neil had almost forgotten the pain until the medicine wore off in the middle of the night. Neil was gasping in pain, trying to remain quiet. He muffled the sounds into his pillow, not wanting to wake Andrew.

The throbbing pain escalated to stabbing pain. And Neil eventually had to bite on his hand to keep from screaming out. He managed for another hour before he shifted trying to find another position, and yelled when his body protested at the mistake.

Andrew was striking out in seconds at the air, before snapping to attention.

Neil took a sharp intake of breath.

"I was trying not to wake you," Neil says shakily.

Andrew levels Neil with a hard stare, before leaving the room. Seconds later he was back.

"Can you sit up?" Andrew asks.

Neil tries, but gasps in pain as he moves to sit up. He tries again, but a strangled scream leaves his lips.

"Stop it," Andrew says, "I'm going to help you."

Neil breathes heavily. Everything felt too hot. He felt exhausted.

"I think the fever's back up," Neil said tiredly.

Andrew doesn't respond, but he hovers a hand over Neil's forehead until Neil nods his consent.

"How long ago did you take Tylenol for it?" Andrew asked.

"Good question," Neil responded. "You're the one in charge of my medications now Mr. Pill Lord."

Andrew doesn't respond, and instead hauls Neil up into sitting position. Neil groans, but is cut off by Andrew dropping a pill in his mouth and handing Neil a glass of water.

"Drink," Andrew said, "And stop being difficult."

"Being difficult is my defining character trait," Neil groans out, "I have nothing interesting about me otherwise."

"That's a startling level of self awareness from someone like you," Andrew says.

Neil flips Andrew off as he swallows down the pill.

Andrew hands him the Tylenol next. Neil takes it. Neil waited for the hot feeling to subside, but instead it got worse.

Abby had said the fever was as a result of an infection, she said she'd bring by Antibiotics the next day. But Neil wondered if Tylenol would really get him through the night.

"I think it's getting worse," Neil groaned.

Neil looked to Andrew, only to find the blonde missing.

"N'Drew," Neil slurred a bit, " And fell back against the pillows."

Andrew appeared moments later and laid something blessedly cold across Neil's temples.

Andrew goes to step away, probably back to bed. But Neil panics, he feels vulnerable and alone. But he never feels that way with Andrew.

"Can you stay?" Neil asks weakly. "At least till I'm asleep?"

Andrew doesn't respond. But instead pushes Neil further up against the wall, and perches against the backboard. That sat in silence for a while.

"If you contacted the team about my excuse," Neil said, "Does that mean you told them I went to Evermore?"

"I told Renee," Andrew responds, "She handled the rest."

Neil sighed a bit in relief and layed down.

"You might be mad at your brother," Neil says after a moment, "But I wouldn't have made it through without him. He even stayed on the phone one time with me when Proust was—"

Neil clamped his eyes shut. Proust hadn't stopped what he was doing when check-in rolled around. But Aaron had taken it the best he could, talking to Neil about anything else.

"He talked to me about New York. I was almost able to pretend Proust wasn't even there." Neil said.

Andrew didn't respond for a moment.

"Do something like that again and I'll kill you," Andrew said.

Neil grinned, "Is that a promise?"

Andrew pushed Neil's head so it faced away from him, and Neil huffed out a weak laugh. Finally he allowed the fever and meds to carry him off to sleep.

Abby and Betsy showed up the next day. Andrew opened the dorm room door for them to step in.

Andrew was taken to the side by Abby, likely questioned about how the night had gone. Meanwhile Betsy came into the bedroom.

Neil's fever hadn't gone down the night before. It had kept rising, though Neil apparently had slept through the entire ordeal. Something that Andrew hadn't gotten the luxury of. Eventually Andrew had run a cold shower and held Neil under the spray. Neil wondered how terrifying it was when he stayed unconscious through that. Neil hadn't woken until a soaking wet Andrew returned Neil back to bed, still in wet pajamas. Neil's glad he woke up at that point, otherwise Andrew would have let him sleep like that.

"Hey Neil," Betsy smiled at him, " Sounds like you had a night last night."

"I slept through most of it," Neil says frowning.

"Lucky you," Andrew said dryly, walking past both Neil and Betsy and crawling into bed.

Andrew laid so his back was to the wall and he shut his eyes.

"Did you and Andrew talk yet?" Betsy asked.

Neil nodded, and then groaned when his head pounded with the motion.

Betsy handed Neil a pill and some water.

"That's the first dose of Antibiotics," Betsy said, " Abby told me to tell you, One before bed, one after you wake up. Andrew?"

Andrew didn't respond but opened one eye and held up a hand to take the pill bottle with.

Betsy handed it over, and Andrew stuffed it beneath his pillow before closing his eyes again.

"The first two doses should finish off the fever. But you'll need to finish the entire bottle even if you're feeling better," Betsy said, "How are you feeling?"

"I looked in the mirror last night," Neil responded with a wry smile, "That had been a mistake. How much trouble do you think I'll get into if I break all the mirrors?"

"Probably quite a bit," Betsy smiles.

Neil huffs out a laugh. Then he goes quiet.

"I hate him you know," Neil said, "Proust I mean. He was always one of the worst. Then Riko. And I know Kengo probably doesn't count—"

"As in Kengo Moriyama?" Betsy asked.

"Yeah," Neil responded, "I cut a deal with him. My body for Jean and Kevin's safety, so I know it doesn't count. But I hated him too."

"Why don't we unpack that in one of your therapy sessions this week," Betsy said, "When you're better rested."

Neil glances at her and raises a questioning eyebrow. "One of?"

"You're on suicide watch Neil," Betsy said, "Which means I see you two times a week. I should bench you and not clear you for any games for a while, but I know this season is literally your life so I won't do that. I feel two sessions with me a week is better than being benched, no?"

Neil couldn't argue with that, "Okay."

Betsy left and Abby came in. Abby redid Neil's bandages, before ruffling his hair.

"The foxes are all calling Wymack in a frenzy to know if you're alright," Abby said, "Wymack told them not to crowd you and stuff, and they have a couple days to calm down before seeing you, but be warned."

Neil nodded, Abby gave a look over to Andrew's form on the bed.

"Never thought I'd see the day," Abby said fondly.

Neil furrowed his eyebrows, "Day for what?"

"Don't worry about it," Abby said. Then Abby was gone.

There was silence, and Neil figured that Andrew had fallen asleep at some point. Neil turned so that his own back was to the wall. Andrew and Neil were face to face. Neil closed his eyes.

"It counts," Andrew said.

"What?" Neil asked, confused.

Andrew's eyes hadn't opened at his own words. But at Neil's question he opened them to stare at Neil.

"Kengo counted," Andrew said. "The first time you were a kid."

"The first time may have counted but—"

"Can you honestly tell me that you felt you had a choice? And can you honestly tell me that he wouldn't have been aware of the situation you were in?"

Neil couldn't. But still he didn't respond, he didn't answer. He should have been able to but it was so hard to admit that it wasn't his choice. It felt like when he tried to say he was worth something now-a-days. The words got caught in his throat.

Neil thought of all the names he'd been called. He wondered if Andrew had a list of names he'd been called too. Words they'd pay never to hear again.

"Let's play another game," Neil said.

One of Andrew's eyes cracked open in response.

"Name for a name," Neil says, "Let's rate them."

"What?" Andrew asked deadpanning.

"Like Drake called you AJ right?" Neil said, "It's a stupid fucking name, negative five out of ten. Where'd he even get the 'J' from?"

"Joseph is my middle name, you dumbass," Andrew says.

"Even more fucking stupid," Neil says, "No creativity. If you're gonna make a Nickname at least make it interesting."

"You're fucking stupid," Andrew says, closing his eyes again.

"Proust called me Baby Boy," Neil continued. He shifts his gaze to the wall behind Andrew.

Andrew doesn't respond for a moment, his eyes remain closed. But then, "Even worse than fucking AJ. Where's the originality in Baby Boy?"

"Negative seven out of ten then?"

"Negative eighteen." Andrew corrects.

"Okay. Well Riko called me Nate."

"Disgusting lack of effort," Andrew throws in, "Negative twenty out of ten."

"Kengo called me princess," Neil said.

"My first rapist called me princess."

"Awful lack of effort." Neil throws in.

"Terrible."

"Really! He could have called me Frog and it would have been better."

"Negative fifty out of ten," Andrew said.

There was no change to Andrew's voice, it was as bored as it had ever been. But Andrew had a look of interest at the conversation. Maybe even a faint glint of amusement in his eye.

The conversation started with nicknames. Then they moved to insults.

"They've all called me slut," Neil said.

"It's a pathetic attempt." Andrew said.

"If you're going to degrade someone do it right," Neil threw out.

Slut earned a rating of negative one hundred out of ten.

Whore ranked worse than slut, and fucktoy was considered to be slightly more creative than slut, but it was clunky and irritating.

Once they finished insults, and things they'd been called. They rated the performances.

"He tried to whip me, but whipped himself in the process."

"Disgraceful."

Score -4000/10.

"One time this one tried to make me feel ashamed by making me cum too, but he couldn't get it to happen."

"What an embarrassment."

Score -4538/10

"One guy couldn't keep his dick from bleeding all over the place."

"What happened?"

"I used my teeth. But really he should be able to keep his dick together better than that."

Score -5698/10.

The conversation was possibly the darkest one Neil had ever had. It revealed weaknesses and shameful secrets he'd once wanted to keep buried. But in the light, talking about them with Andrew, It felt like a reclamation of himself.

At some point in the conversation, Neil and Andrew had moved from separate beds, to sitting on the same bed, to eating breakfast out in the kitchen, and finally to smoking in the window.

At some point Neil broke off into peels of laughter at something he said himself. And Andrew watched amused, Neil swore he saw the slightest quirk to Andrew's lips. The sight made Neil feel breathless.

"Hey," Neil said, stealing Andrew's cigarette after his own burnt out. "You're awesome."

"Awful insult Wesninski. Negative infinity out of ten." Andrew said.

"I'm being serious." Neil said, "You are."

There was a moment of silence as Andrew pulled out another cigarette and lit it. He took a drag, and blew the smoke into Neil's face.

"Shut up."

Neil had forgotten that Matt, Seth, and Andrew's group were coming back the next day. He forgot right up until the moment he heard a loud gasp as he walked down the hall to his dorm. He would have stayed inside, but Andrew had sent Neil out for cigarettes because Neil apparently Neil was an incessant leach.

Neil looked up to see Nicky lugging a suitcase.

Nicky's eyes were wide as he looked at Neil.

"Oh my god," Nicky said, "Renee said— But I— Oh my god."

Nicky had Neil's face in a parental hold, his eyes tracking over Neil's features. Neil curses the fact that he was in short sleeves and shorts still. He'd meant to put on more coverage before seeing the foxes. But shorts and short sleeves were easier on Neil's injuries.

Nicky sees the cuts on Neil's arms, and his breath turn shaky.

"Neil—"

"Betsy already has me on watch," Neil supplies, "Two suicide watches in one season. I feel like that's a record."

Nicky doesn't laugh. He doesn't even give that fond exasperated chuckle the foxes gave when Neil made his dark comments.

Seth and Matt came in next. The two were laughing. But their spirits fell when they saw Neil and Nicky out in the hall. Neil could barely see them from around Nicky. And Neil knew they couldn't see him either.

Neil sighed, and prepared himself for the incoming tidal wave. Neil stepped around Nicky, giving Seth and Matt the full view of him.

Seth's phone dropped from his hand, and Matt had to lean against Matt for support. Neil heard the click of the stairwell door, and Jean and Kevin walked in.

Kevin's eyes went wide and Jean's mouth was opened in shock.

"Andrew's going to kill me," Matt said, "Because I am definitely killing Aaron."

Neil went to speak, but Andrew's voice cut in.

"No need Boyd," Andrew said, "My clone and I are about to have a little chat."

Aaron walked through the door at that moment, and Neil felt guilt hit him like a tidal wave. Aaron looked terrible, he looked like he hadn't slept in days. His hands were trembling and, when he saw Neil, his knees buckled.

"I shouldn't have let you go—"

"Regret is such a useless emotion," Andrew spoke in German. Dangerous and low, "You let him go somewhere you knew he was going to get raped!"

German already sounded like an angry language. But in Andrew's tone it was downright murderous.

Andrew had his knife drawn. But Neil was somehow faster. Neil stepped between the two brothers in record time.

"Stop it!" Neil commanded, "All of you stop it. It's not his fault."

"He helped you lie so that you could go! He kept the fact that you went to himself!" Seth shouted.

Andrew was silent. He was looking at the place where his blade was pressed lightly against Neil's chest. Neil's probably lucky Andrew had quick enough reflexes to stop. Aaron sat behind Neil on the ground shaking.

"Look at him!" Neil shouted, "He wasn't even going to hear me out! I practically had to lock him in the room to get him to listen. I would have gone regardless of whether or not I'd told someone where I went. Do you think Riko would have let me come back if Aaron wasn't aware I was there?"

"Why did you go?" Nicky asked quietly.

"He had something hanging over me. Something important. I didn't have a choice."

"He threatened someone from the team," Kevin translated.

Neil glared at Kevin for giving away that information.

"Neil-"

"No Matt!" Neil said, but his eyes fell on Andrew, "I'd do it again if I had to. I'd go back a thousand times over if it meant all of you are safe."

"Abram—"

Jean's own voice cut him off. Cracking with emotion.

"These have been the best months of my entire life," Neil said. "I won't let Riko take them from me."

Matt was quiet.

"Next time I see him, I'm breaking every bone in his body," Matt said.

"I'll settle for us crushing his hopes and dreams on the court," Neil smiled.

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Chapter 35

The day the girls were scheduled to arrive back, Neil decided he was well enough to go for his morning run. Andrew was already out of bed, and Neil could hear the shower running. So Neil got up and limped to the closet, and grabbed his clothes.

Getting changed was an ordeal. But ordeal or not, Neil was itching to go for a run.

Neil exited the bedrooms whilst checking his phone, but came to a stop when he realized that the door had, quite literally, been barricaded.

"Where do you think you're going?" Nicky asked.

Neil turned slowly around to find that Nicky, Seth, and Matt were sitting at the kitchen table, and Kevin and Jean were sitting in the bean bags.

"Well I was going to go for a run." Neil said.

"How fucking stupid are you?" Seth asked.

"Apparently very if Wymack is to be believed. Now can one of you help me move this shit? I need to go for a run."

Every face in the room deadpans.

"You aren't leaving this room Junkie," Andrew says.

Neil turns around to see Andrew fresh out of the shower. Andrew's hair was messy and blonde and fell into his eyes. The early morning light coming in through the window made his eyes shine brighter.

"That sounds like a challenge," Neil said.

Andrew glanced at Neil, "Try but you won't succeed."

Neil huffed. "Just let me go for my run."

"No."

"But—"

"Go back to bed, Junkie."

Neil huffed and turned on his heel, stalking back into the bedroom and flopping hard onto the bed. He winced slightly but he was too petty to admit that flopping like that was a bad idea, especially when Andrew stood in the doorway with a raised eyebrow.

"You are a child," Andrew said.

"You're a bitch," Neil responded.

"Awful insult. Negative four hundred out of ten."

Neil flipped Andrew off, right before Andrew shut the door of the bedroom.

Neil huffed again, before noticing the window in the bedroom. Neil glanced once more at the door before slipping off his shoes and walking silently over to it.

The drop was too far with all the injuries Neil had, but Neil also had plenty of rope making material in the room.

Neil quickly went about tying sheets and blankets together, before securing the blanket rope to a bedpost.

He took out the screen as silently as he could, and dropped his shoes out the window. Then Neil threw the homemade rope out the window, and climbed out.

He made it down, even though his arms complained the entire time. When he got to the bottom Neil rolled them out, threw on his shoes, and then ran off.

He had been gone for a total of five minutes before his phone began to ring.

"Hello?" Neil answered.

"Wesninski," Wymack's voice came through the speaker of Neil's phone.

Neil hung up, and continued to run. It was twenty minutes before Andrew finally found him. Neil had been running alongside the road and had startled when a car horn honked at him. Neil turned and saw Andrew's car.

Neil probably should have listened, but at this point he was running out of spite. Neil turned and booked it. Matt and Seth were running at him from the direction he turned to run to.

He flew past Andrew's car running towards Matt and Seth, before dropping and sliding between their legs.

"MOTHERFUCKER!!!" Neil heard Seth shout. "HOW THE FUCK IS HE OUTRUNNING US RIGHT NOW!?"

Neil kept running.

Andrew's car pulled up, and Kevin and Jean hopped out giving chase. Neil leaped out into the road, barely avoiding getting hit by a car, and booking it across an intersection.

"Oh fucking hell!" Jean said.

Neil watched as he lost them for the minute it took the cars to clear, and then turned back to his run.

It was around eleven thirty when they found him again. And this time they'd brought the girls. Neil was making his way across another intersection when Andrew's sleek car pulled up on the other side. Parallel parking in a dangerous manner, before two figures hopped out.

"Oh shit," Neil muttered to himself as Andrew's car pulled up in the area he'd been running towards. "Oh FUCK!!" He said when Renee hopped out of Andrew's car alongside the blonde.

Neil turned to go right, but Allison, Seth, and Nicky were coming from that side. Backtracking showed Matt and Dan. And Kevin, Jean, and Aaron were covering the right.

Neil let out a curse before backtracking a few steps, and turning into an alley right before Matt and Dan could catch up.

There was a fence at the end of the ally, and Neil hopped up and scaled it before hopping down on the other side, Neil's legs burned. But when he looked back the foxes were staring at

him in annoyance. Well all the foxes but two. Renee and Andrew charged forward at the fence.

"Oh shit," Neil muttered before sprinting yet again. Neil turns the corner, and runs. He sprints, in front of him the pedestrian walkway is still showing the walking symbol, Neil looks back to see only Renee had made it around the corner. Neil turns back. About to run out into the street, but he sees a car coming. Neil curses as he tries to stop before he runs out in front of the car. Instead he trips and falls directly into the path of said car.

A moment of fear flashes through him. It's brief and it's faint. But it's there. But before the car can hit him. Strong hands grabbed him and pulled him back.

Neil breathes heavily.

"That was strange," Neil laughed.

Neil glanced back at Andrew, who had released him, and was breathing heavily as well. Andrew looks up and glares.

"I think I was actually scared to get hit there for a moment," Neil breathes.

The revelation is more to himself than to Andrew. And Andrew's reaction is cut off by the rest of the foxes making a showing.

"Jesus Christ Neil," Matt heaves. "We've been chasing you all fucking morning."

Neil sits, the pain catching up as he finally stops and allows the adrenaline to ebb out.

Neil's mind goes to his fear though.

He doesn't know how it happened. But somewhere inside himself, a flame had been lit. And it was burning with the need to live.

And Neil was unsure whether he should let it grow or not.

When they finally got to the court, Abby tore Neil a new asshole.

"I have half a mind to bench you for the rest of the season!" Abby yelled, "What were you thinking? Running around and making your teammates chase you!"

"I was bored." Neil said. "I decided that they needed more cardio."

The foxes all turned and glared at Neil. And Neil rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Wesninski, you look like Frankenstein's Monster!" Wymack cut in, "Now is not the time for you to be running around playing chase as a way to alleviate your fucking boredom!"

"We were really worried Neil," Renee said, "You shouldn't do things like that."

Neil could reply with a snarky remark, but he would have felt bad for doing that to Renee. Not to mention, the other foxes looked equally as worried.

Neil sighed, "Sorry," He said finally, "Running is the only real healthy coping mechanism I have... okay? They locked me in the room when I tried to go for one this morning and I took it as a challenge."

Wymack sighs, a hand resting on his forehead in exhaustion.

"Alright," Wymack says, sighing, "Let's go over what's going to be happening. We are in the evens bracket, which means we are playing Fridays. Odd ranked are playing Thursdays. We have an away game in Austin on the twelfth. The good thing is that it is far enough away that the board is going to let us fly there."

Neil leans back as he listens, and his eyes catch the silver glinting in Andrew's hands.

Andrew was flipping a blade in between his fingers with practiced ease, but Neil knew how to do it better.

Neil grabbed the blade from Andrew and began to flip it in his hands like a pro. Circling it around the back of his hand and back into his palm with mastered ease. Andrew glanced at Neil, watching his hands carefully. As if trying to learn.

Neil hands the blade back.

Andrew begins to copy what Neil did.

"On the 19th we are home for a rematch against Belmonte," Wymack says, "On the 26th we are away against Arkansas."

Andrew struggles with getting the twist around the back of his hand, so Neil holds out his hand. Andrew hands him the blade again, and Neil shows Andrew a trick using his thumb to help the blade along.

"All three of these teams have been to spring championships. They know what they are doing, and we are going to have to work hard to keep up and prove we belong here." Wymack states.

Neil hands the blade back to Andrew, who had been holding out his hands with a slight look of eagerness in his eyes.

Wymack hands papers to Matt, who hands them all out. Neil doesn't glance at his. He could look at it later. But his eyes were drawn to the way Andrew's fingers so adeptly copied Neil's motions.

Matt gave Andrew a wary glance as he set Andrew's next to the blonde.

Wymack talks about UT for a moment, but Neil already knows enough about all the teams they'll be playing. You don't grow up a Raven without knowing the biggest threats on the court.

Neil steals the knife back, and holds out his other hand. Andrew gives him a glance, before producing a second knife and handing it over to Neil.

Neil begins doing the flipping knife motions with both knives in both hands, before tossing the knives to the opposite hands and doing it again. Slowly Neil got faster and faster with it until it was like a bizarre form of juggling. Neil begins throwing it behind his back, and juggling the knives around his face. Andrew watches with intense focus.

"There's a week's break between— Jesus hell, WESNINSKI!!!" Neil doesn't know how Wymack hadn't noticed the slow build up to knife juggling, but now Wymack noticed. "Minyard! I thought we fucking agreed the dumbass doesn't get to have knives."

Andrew shrugged and continued to watch Neil's undisturbed motions, "I'm watching him."

"He's already lucky he didn't rip his stitches this morning!!!" Wymack said, "We don't need him having anymore! Get them the fuck away from him!"

"I would coach," Andrew said, " But then I might get my hand cut off."

Neil had to lean back to avoid one of the blades slicing into his eye.

"Wesninski! You are already benched for a week! Knock it off before I bench you for the whole first round!" Wymack shouts.

The knives clatter to the ground.

"IS THAT REALLY ALL YOU HAVE TO FUCKING SAY!?" Seth asked, "WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU WHEN WE WERE CHASING HIM ALL AROUND THIS MORNING!?"

"A week?" Neil asked, ignoring Seth's tirade, "That's not fair!"

"You look like you've been put through a meat grinder," Dan says. "I'd say he's being generous."

"I can still play!" Neil said indignantly.

Andrew reached over and pinched Neil's wrist. The pain flared up Neil's arm and he struck out, nailing Andrew in the jaw.

Neil winced when Andrew glared, "Sorry. Reflex."

"Well when someone can pinch you and not get hit in the jaw because of 'reflex' you can come back to my court. Until then, you're off of it." Wymack said.

Kevin glared at Neil, "Just shut up and get better already. This team hardly stands a chance against any of these teams with you on it. When you're off of it this will be impossible."

"I never can tell if you're complimenting or just being a dick," Neil muttered.

"Alright," Wymack said, clapping his hands, "Get the hell out, go get food or something. Don't forget that you all have appointments with Betsy tomorrow. Neil, you *definitely* have an appointment with Betsy tomorrow. And if you try to avoid going so that you can go for a run or sneak a practice I will sic this entire team on you."

"I already have one with her tonight," Neil said.

"Are you telling me that you, of all people, don't need the extra day of therapy?" Wymack deadpans.

Neil goes to speak, but stops. Then nods. Because that was fair.

"Alright," Wymack says, "All of you out."

The foxes filed out of the room, and back to their cars. Though Neil could see the pointed way that they all avoided looking at him.

It made Neil's stomach twist the entire drive back.

Aaron was quiet, and had been quiet ever since he'd seen Neil again. Neil didn't know the specific reason behind Aaron's silence, whether it was guilt or fear. But he knew it was because of his involvement with Neil going back to Evermore.

When the others got out of their cars to go inside, Aaron remained inside Andrew's car. Aaron looked ready to say something, but then he stopped and got out. Andrew waited till Aaron was inside, and then he and Neil were off to therapy.

"How'd the foxes take your appearance?" Betsy asked once Neil flipped down onto her couch.

Neil felt tired. And Andrew lounged on the couch near Neil.

Neil doesn't know why he wanted Andrew back with him this time, he just did.

"None of them really commented yet," Neil said, "But none of them particularly looked happy either."

"Do you have any idea of why that might be?" Betsy asked.

Neil shrugged. He had a few, but due to his fucked up mental state they were probably false.

"I probably look pretty disgusting with all the bite marks and stuff," Neil said.

"Or maybe they are mad that you lied to them," Andrew said pointedly.

Neil winced. But he stayed quiet. Betsy waited for a moment, before deciding to curb that part of the conversation for another time.

Andrew was silent, unlike back when he'd been on his medicine and constantly interrupted the sessions. Now he sat quietly, watching the proceedings with a bored expression.

Neil grew tired of the silence.

"My birthday is coming up soon," Neil said, "It's this month actually."

Betsy perked up at that, "And how old will you be?"

"Nineteen," Neil replies.

Andrew glances over at Neil at that.

"Do the foxes know?" Betsy asked.

"No," Neil responded, "I don't really like my birthday. My sixth birthday is the day my mom died and the day that Kengo—"

Neil cut himself off. He didn't want to finish the sentence. And by the look on Betsy's face, he didn't have to.

"Also Riko always made my birthdays awful," Neil said. "One time he soaked one of my mom's pictures in blood and hung it on my locker. It was awful."

Betsy nodded, "I can't imagine anyone wanting to celebrate their birthday after that sort of thing.

Neil nodded. He thought about his mom. Thought about her eyes. Thought about how for years he'd wished for her to pick him up and run away with him forever.

"There was a time when I thought about running from Evermore," Neil said, "I was only six but I would try every night. My mother and I had left emergency cash all over the place in the states, and I had this plan in my head to get to one of them and just keep running."

"Why didn't you?" Betsy asked.

"At first it was because of Riko." Neil said choking on the name," he said he would protect me... And when I was with him... I felt safe. Then it was because I wanted to protect Jean and Kevin."

"Andrew protects them now," Betsy said," Why do you stay now?"

"Because I wouldn't have a prayer of getting away." Neil said. And his eyes found Andrew," Plus it stopped muttering after some time. I stopped caring if I died or not."

Except Neil's mind flashed to that morning, when Andrew had saved Neil just before Neil could get run over by a car.

There had been a flash of fear then, something deep in Neil's stomach. Something that was faint, but yet still alive.

It flickered like a flame in the wind. And Neil didn't know if he wanted the wind to extinguish it completely, or make it burn brighter than ever before.

Arriving back at the tower, Neil made to go to his room, but he was stopped by Dan.

Dan's eyes landed on Neil's broken form, and she gritted her teeth. Neil took a hesitant step away, and Dan finally sighed.

"Don't lie to us like that again," Dan said, " *Ever* ."

Neil let himself breathe a short sigh of relief at that, glad that that's why the girls had been so upset.

"I can't promise anything if it's to protect you guys," Neil said.

Andrew slipped past Neil into the room.

Dan made a face, "No," Dan said, " You need to promise, because *this* is fucked up."

Neil glanced at her.

" *You* matter Neil," Dan said, " This entire team adores you. I've never seen the monster so amicable, if you can call it that. I've never seen Seth so motivated. I've never seen this team act this close, and we owe it to you. You need to *stop* putting yourself second. It hurts Neil. To care that much about someone, but watch as they don't give a damn about themselves."

Neil is silent. He doesn't have a response. Whenever Kevin and Jean had given him this speech, he'd ignored them and pushed it to the side. But now, something had shifted.

Dan sighed when she didn't get a response, and she pulled Neil into a gentle hug.

Neil felt safe, and he sank into the embrace.

"Get some sleep," Dan said with a sigh, " Rest up so we can get you back on the court and back to giving Wymack gray hairs."

"Bold of you to assume I stop giving him gray hairs when I'm injured."

"Rest so that you can get back to killing him at a slightly slower pace," Dan corrected herself, "Meanwhile, Allison and Seth have overtaken our dorm. So I'm going over to Matt's."

"Where's Renee sleeping?" Neil asked.

"I think Andrew threw her his keys to your dorm before therapy," Dan smiled. "You three can all have a movie night while Allison and I get some."

Dan released Neil and walked off to Matt and Seth's dorm, and Neil walked into his.

Renee sat in one of the bean bag chairs, and Andrew was perched in the window.

Neil curled up in the second Bean bag, and fell asleep.

Chapter 36

Neil was exiled from the gym on Thursday, much to his displeasure, and instead he sat in Wymack's office while the coach watched UT games. Neil had also been given a game to watch, but he'd seen it already so he stared at the screen pretending to watch.

In reality he could write down every note needed off the game, based on only memory.

The foxes reconvened after the gym, and Wymack presented the notes they'd made on the games.

After that it came time for the first day of spring classes. As usual, Allison came to do Neil's makeup. She covered his tattoo as she normally did. And she managed to cover up the bruises covering Neil's face. But Neil watched as she winced at the sight of Neil's neck.

Neil knew a few of the bite marks would scar. He had been trying not to think about it.

"I look disgusting with them don't I?" Neil chuckles weakly.

Allison and Neil had developed a system since she'd begun covering his tattoo. Neil would show up at the girls' dorm, normally after Dan and Renee headed out, and he would sit himself on the counter of their bathroom while Allison did his makeup.

Sometimes Renee would do his nails, usually with Palmetto colors. Though there was the one time Renee talked Neil into purple and pink. But most of the time Allison was alone with Neil.

Today was such a day, and Neil wonders if that's why he allowed himself to be so vulnerable in front of Allison.

Allison's hand stilled as she heard Neil's question, and her eyes shot to Neil's face.

"They carved their names into my torso," Neil said quietly, "All of those are going to scar too."

"Neil—"

"Thank you for doing this," Neil said waving around his face, "I don't think you understand how much it means to me. You helping me cover what they've done to me... What they put on me. It makes me feel... less disgusting."

Neil had avoided looking at Allison's eyes the entire time, but when he finished he glanced up. He barely had time to see Allison's eyes shining with tears before she pulled Neil into a hug.

"You aren't disgusting Neil," Allison said, "No matter what they put on you!"

Her fingernails card through Neil's hair, and Neil buries his face into her neck.

"I wish I could believe you," Neil said, "I want to see what you guys see when you look at me. I'm trying—"

Because Neil was. He looked in the mirror every morning, and tried to see what Nicky said about him when Nicky said Neil was attractive. Neil tried to see what Seth meant when the guy said Neil had a great ass, but all Neil saw was an object other people have abused. Neil *tried* to see the strength that Renee said he had, but all he saw was weakness. Neil tried to see the leadership Dan told him she saw, but he saw a broken kid who still needed his mom. He tried to see the person Jean and Kevin say protected them, but all he saw was failure.

But the foxes *saw something*. So there must be *something* there. There must be something past the brands, and the scars, and the dirtiness.

"I want to be what you guys say I am," Neil says, "I want to see it. That's why I went... because if I lose you guys... I don't know if I'll ever get there."

Allison was quiet, but her grip on him tightened.

"I'm sorry for lying to all of you," Neil said. His voice wobbled slightly, but he managed not to cry, "I'm sorry."

Again Allison didn't respond, but the hand in his hair moved in a manner that said Allison forgave him.

Allison moves away, and sniffles before rubbing the tears from her eyes.

"Do it ever again and I'll be upset, Wesninski!" Allison said, pointing a makeup brush at Neil.

Neil smiles, "Your threats are a bit weak. You might want to work on that."

Allison flicks Neil on the forehead, before taking Neil to her closet, and handing him a scarf he could use to hide his neck.

Classes that day were boring. The beginning of the new semester meant all new classes, all new teachers, and all new syllabi. Andrew was still in class when Neil got back to his room. Which wasn't surprising. Neil got back before a lot of the foxes.

Neil made himself a sandwich and then made a second one for Andrew. He put Andrew's in the fridge and then Neil ate his while working on a complex math equation.

When Andrew got back, Neil pointed to the fridge. And Andrew pulled out the Sandwich. Andrew glanced at Neil, and then back down at the sandwich.

"I promise it's not too healthy," Neil said. "I'm not Kevin."

"If you were Kevin you would have put a bottle of alcohol with it," Andrew responded, sitting down at the table. There was a thunk as Andrew dropped his bag.

"You really think Kevin would *share* his alcohol?" Neil asked with a grin, "I think you are thinking too highly of the man."

Andrew didn't respond, but rather pulled out a textbook and began to read.

Neil glanced at the cover, "Criminology? You want to go into law? Or maybe order?"

"I want nothing," Andrew responds without looking up.

"Well that's completely false," Neil said, "You obviously want something. For instance, for some reason you want to keep me alive."

"Keeping you alive is in my best interest," Andrew said.

"Which makes it a want," Neil responded. "Unless you classify it as a need, but that wouldn't be correct."

"Are you always this annoying while doing homework?" Andrew asked.

"Only with you," Neil smirks at Andrew.

Andrew stares at Neil annoyed. But Andrew goes back to what he's working on.

Neil eventually gets bored of the silence, and goes back to his math problem. Though he sneaks glances at Andrew as he solved his equation.

Seeing Andrew sitting there at the table and doing homework was such a foreign sight. Andrew's usual bored expression was in place, but his eyes were concentrated on the page. Neil wondered if Andrew's eyes had always been so sharp and focused.

"Stop. Staring." Andrew said.

"Make me," Neil smirked.

At a quarter to three, Andrew and Neil meet the others at the cars. Andrew and Kevin hopped into Andrew's car to drive to their session with Betsy. And the rest of the foxes spread out in the remaining vehicles. Neil gets into Jean's car alongside Nicky and Aaron.

Wymack caught Neil as soon as Neil walked through the door, and shoved Neil back into his office. Neil groaned as he was sat down and handed another disk.

"Stop whining and watch the damn game," Wymack said.

Neil huffed and put the game in, but didn't bother watching it. Again he'd already seen it before. This time though, he didn't even try to hide the fact he wasn't watching the game.

"Pay attention!" Wymack snapped.

"Ah yes," Neil said, sarcasm heavy in his voice, "What an impossible goal. I have never seen such movement and grace."

The room was silent for a moment, "Alright wiseass," Wymack said, " Tell me a game you haven't watched."

"There isn't one," Neil responded, " This is quite literally my life, I take it seriously."

"Sure," Wymack said sarcastically, " You're will to live shines bright for all to see."

Neil smiles at that, and Wymack quirks a small grin.

"Just get me some good notes, Wiseass."

Neil had just finished off an entire notebook of notes. When Aaron came to get Neil to go to Reddin. Neil dropped the notebook in front of Wymack, who glared at Neil for the amount. He wrote that many mainly out of spite.

Neil drove, and Aaron sat passenger. The two sat in silence on the way to Betsy's. And when they got there, Aaron hopped up and went first.

Neil wondered internally who should start the conversation between himself and Aaron. They had a lot they needed to talk about, but Neil wasn't sure if Aaron even wanted to talk.

Aaron came back out and Neil went in to speak with Betsy. Neil mainly babbled on about Exy. Betsy seemed okay with it, and Neil wondered if she knew how much being off the court was affecting his mental state at the moment.

"Sorry," Neil said when he realized he spent the entire session talking about a sport.

Betsy smiled, "Sometimes therapy just needs to be the place you can relax," She said, " You'll be back on the court in no time Neil."

Neil nodded, happy that Betsy seemed to understand.

Aaron was waiting for him out by the car when Neil left. But Neil noticed he was sitting, his head bowed.

"Can we talk?" Aaron asked when Neil made it over.

Neil sat down next to Aaron on the curb.

"Yeah," Neil said.

Aaron was silent for another moment. "It doesn't feel like I did the right thing. I let you go, and look at you. Neil, you tried to die again."

Aaron went silent after that, his hands shook.

"I sent you back there," Aaron said, " And my brother who we were trying to save even said we shouldn't have."

Neil is silent for a moment, "You told Andrew for years that he shouldn't have killed your mom."

That seemed to yank Aaron out of his sadness and pull him into anger.

"That wasn't the right—"

Neil cuts him off," Was there even a correct choice there?"

Aaron halts, staring at Neil.

"Think about it Aaron," Neil said," What choice was truly the 'right' one in that situation? The one where Andrew let you get beaten? The one where Andrew went to Luther just to be ignored again? The one where Andrew went to CPS, the people who didn't do shit for him when he was younger? Or the one where he killed someone and protected you in the process? Maybe it wasn't the right choice. But sometimes there isn't a correct choice. Sometimes there isn't a clear answer. Sometimes it's going with the best choice you have."

Aaron was still silent.

"Besides this one didn't turn out so bad," Neil said," You've got Katelyn. I doubt you would have met her had your mother not died."

"If Andrew knew about Katelyn he would flip," Aaron said," I can't bring her around."

"You and Andrew need therapy," Neil muttered.

Aaron turned and glared," I swear to God Wesninski... of all people *you* can't say those words."

Neil ignores Aaron's pointed stare, " You should go to Betsy with Andrew," Neil says.

Aaron sneers at Betsy's name.

"I trust her despite the fact that the only other therapist I've had was Proust." Neil said. And then his mind flitted to the fear he'd had of death only the day before, "And the other day... I was actually scared to get hit by that car... not much but— But it's more than ever before. She must be doing something right."

Neil didn't say anything more, but he got into the car. Aaron got in after, and they drove to the stadium.

Before going inside Aaron stopped him.

"Why does Andrew like you so much?"

Neil raised an eyebrow, "No, Andrew hates me more than anyone else here."

"But he keeps you around," Aaron said. "You went to Evermore for him!"

"I consider him to be my friend," Neil said, "He was the first person to ask for my consent when he helped me walk the day after my first night in Columbia. And I know he hates me, but I think he keeps me around because I understand."

Neil walks into the court after that, probably leaving Aaron with a lot to think about.

Wymack catches Neil yet again before Neil can run off and exercise. Neil groaned as he was handed yet another game to watch.

"Come on!" Neil groaned, "At least let me lob Exy balls at Kevin."

"No."

"I'll settle for lobbing knives."

"That's worse!!!"

Neil ended up sitting annoyed in front of a computer screen in the lounge. The video played, but Neil wasn't watching it. Instead he was wondering if it was possible for him to fit through the ventilation shafts to escape.

Renee walked in before Neil could attempt his great escape though. She raised an eyebrow at Neil who was using a coin to unscrew the vent.

"I'm checking for intruders," Neil said hurriedly.

Renee smirks and holds out her hand. And Neil hands her the coin begrudgingly.

"Coach said to come check that you hadn't escaped yet," Renee said smiling, "Guess I made it just in time."

Neil glares and, in a brilliant display of adulthood, sticks out his tongue while sticking up his middle finger.

Renee laughs again before sitting down next to Neil.

"I actually volunteered to come back though, " Renee said, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

Neil was beginning to feel oddly popular with all the people wanting to speak with him.

Neil raised an eyebrow.

Renee chuckled, then her smile darkened a bit.

"Andrew and I want to teach you how to fight better," Renee said, "After Evermore, I would feel a lot better if I knew you knew how to use a knife for more than tricks and self injury."

Neil glances at Renee.

"I can throw them too," Neil said.

Renee hummed, "And how often is your aim more based on luck than skill?"

Neil glared, "You know I'm starting to not like you."

Renee laughed. And Neil smiled.

"It would make me feel a lot better," Renee said.

Neil softened at the tone in Renee's voice. Neil wondered how hard it was for the foxes to see Neil like this, battered and bruised.

"Okay," Neil said softly, then he smirked, "But be warned, I won't hold back."

Renee smirked at Neil again, "I think I'll be okay."

Renee made to leave the room, but Neil stopped her.

"How's he doing without the medication?" Neil asked.

Renee sent a smirk in his direction, before holding open the door for Neil to follow her.

"Come see for yourself."

Neil followed Renee out to the court, and as soon as he made it out he could hear Wymack cursing.

"MINYARD KNOCK IT OFF BEFORE YOU HURT SOMEONE!!!"

Wymack cursed again, so Neil was willing to bet that Andrew didn't stop whatever he was doing.

And what Andrew was doing was indeed dangerous. Though Neil was tempted to join in.

Andrew was shutting down the goal, and doing so with a vigor that amazed Neil. But when Andrew was clearing the balls, he was aiming directly for Kevin and Seth's ankles.

After Kevin nearly broke his neck avoiding one, Wymack cursed again before turning around.

His eyes caught Neil, and Neil was prepared to be locked inside a closet so he couldn't go running again. But instead Wymack pointed at Neil.

"Get him to knock it the fuck off!" Wymack ordered.

Neil raised an eyebrow, and Renee giggled from beside him.

"Coach I think he'd sooner lob a ball at my head than listen to me," Neil said.

"You and I both know that isn't true," Wymack said. "Now get him to knock it off."

Neil sighed and stepped towards the doors. Wymack called a pause to play, and Neil strode over to Andrew.

Andrew slung his arms over the racket lazily, and regarded Neil as he approached.

"Is there a reason that you are trying to remove our front line?" Neil asked.

Andrew stared at Neil lazily, not responding to the question.

Neil sighed, "Look," Neil said, " We already don't have the best chances at winning this Championship. You shouldn't be trying to take out any of our players."

"We have enough players who could sub in," Andrew said, " I see no reason as to why I can't have my fun."

"Your fun is putting the safety of members of our team at risk." Neil responded.

"And?"

"And even you should know that's not a smart move." Neil said.

Andrew shot a glare at Neil for the dig, and Neil realized he wasn't getting anywhere. He thought about his options for a moment, and then he decided on what he wanted to do.

"Stop aiming at their ankles," Neil said," And I'll let you see my scars."

Neil touches a hand to his abdomen, that way Andrew knows exactly which scars Neil meant.

Andrew glanced at Neil for a minute, before pointing his racket at Wymack on the sideline.

"I'll collect later tonight, you're coming with us to Columbia," Andrew said," Tell Coach to mind his pay grade."

Neil was confused, but let it slide when Wymack yelled for Neil to exit the court again.

Wymack glanced at Neil before turning back to practice, "Is that going to be a problem?" Wymack asked.

Neil stared blankly at the coach.

Wyamck sighed, before throwing his hands in the air.

"He's right," Wymack said," It's outside my paygrade."

"What is?"

"Nope. I don't get paid enough. Go be obtuse elsewhere."

Neil stared for another moment, before realizing that was all he was going to get, and then he walked off, back to watching boring games of Exy.

When Neil went to get dressed for Columbia, he stood in front of Andrew's bed, waiting for Andrew to pay attention.

"Is this a yes?" Andrew asked.

"I wouldn't have offered it if it was a no," Neil responded.

Neil slipped his shirt off over his head, and then he glanced at Andrew's face. Andrew's eyes hadn't left Neil's facial features.

Neil offers out a hand for Andrew to take, and Andrew puts his hand in Neil's without even a moment's consideration. Neil's hands shake.

"If it's a no, then it's a no," Andrew said, keeping his eyes on Neil's face.

"It's not a no," Neil said, "It's new."

Neil places Andrew's hand on his chest. Neil's body tenses on instinct, but after a moment he relaxes. Once he does, Andrew's eyes look down.

Neil stares at Andrew's face, trusting Andrew not to touch anywhere he hadn't been granted the permission to do so.

Neil waited for the usual expression of horror. The disgust. But Andrew's face was as apathetic as always. Andrew's fingers ghosted over the scars covering his front. Andrew's hand found the word ugly. Neil's heart hammered under Andrew's touch.

"For such an honest person," Andrew said, "Your skin lies more than anyone I've ever met."

Andrew stepped back and left Neil before the words processed in Neil's mind. The moment that they did, Neil felt something flutter inside himself.

And somewhere a small flame grew just a little brighter.

The drive to Columbia, Neil was with Kevin and Jean. Neil spent the ride poking at the back of Kevin's head, which evolved into a slap fight, which evolved in both cars pulling over, and Neil being moved to Andrew's car.

Andrew stared at Neil with irritation when Neil hopped into Andrew's car. But they drove off either way.

Sweetie's was the same as it had been. The cousin's got their cracker dust. They all ate their ice cream.

Neil flicked sugar packets at Kevin until Kevin began flicking them back in annoyance.

And then came Eden's. Neil made the choice to stay with Andrew when they parked the car. Neil didn't feel comfortable walking into the club without Andrew.

The walk over was nice, Neil stood close to Andrew. Trying to keep a watchful eye on the people around them.

Arriving at the club, the bouncers gave Andrew some words of encouragement, but Andrew treated them with the same bored expression he gave everyone else.

Nicky, Aaron, Kevin, and Jean were all standing around the bar when Neil and Andrew walked up. Roland was patting Aaron on the shoulder heartily. And it occurred to Neil that the last time they'd come to Eden's was before Drake.

Roland looked at Andrew and Neil when they approached.

"How are you two feeling?" Roland asked.

Andrew didn't respond, but Neil did.

"Same as I always have, I want to throw myself off a bridge and die," Neil answered honestly.

Roland's face was shocked, and he turned to Andrew.

"Is he doing okay?" Roland asked.

"He's currently on Suicide Watch," Andrew deadpanned.

Roland glanced back at Neil.

"I'm fine," Neil said.

Nicky made a groan of disbelief, Aaron rolled his eyes. Jean and Kevin face palmed.

They got their tray of drinks and made their way back to their table. Neil did a few shots alongside the others.

A few guys sidled up to Neil, trying to engage the redhead in conversation. But Neil was distracted by literally everything else in the room.

When the tray finished, Neil grabbed it up and stumbled slightly when standing.

"Hey pretty thing," Someone said while grabbing Neil's elbow to steady him. "Need some help?"

Neil stared at the giant man, an annoyed scowl passing over his features. However, a strong arm pulled Neil back into a strong chest.

"Fuck off," Andrew's voice sounded as bored as always, but the threat was clear either way.

The man scurried off in a hurry after Andrew showed up, and Andrew pushed Neil towards the bar.

"I leave your side for two seconds and you almost start World War 3," Andrew says.

"In my defense you should know better than to leave me unattended at any point in time," Neil shot back.

Roland noticed the two of them quickly, and he worked his way over. Neil's hands were folded on the counter in front of him.

Roland's eyes landed on Neil's wrists. He grinned, and Neil frowned.

"Andrew," Roland said, "You know they make padded cuffs. You should take better care of him."

Andrew stiffened slightly beside Neil, and Neil frowned further.

"Why would he cuff me?" Neil asked, "I got these from someone trying to keep me from fighting back."

Roland's gaze turned horrified. "Those are fresh kid."

"I have alot of fresh wounds right now," Neil responded, "You should see my neck. Now don't change the subject, why is Andrew tying me down?"

Roland looks between Andrew and Neil.

"Ah you don't know yet," Roland said slowly.

Andrew's glare isn't very prominent, but it's there. And Neil finally gets annoyed. Roland had that same expression everyone else did when they said he was missing something. But Neil had no clue what he was missing.

"What am I missing?" Neil asked.

Roland looks to Andrew, who slowly pans to look at Neil.

"Roland thinks you're bad at following instructions," Andrew says.

Neil frowns. "I am bad at following instructions... Wymack tells me so all the time."

"Isn't Wymack your coach? Is he—"

"No," Andrew answers, "He's still not getting it."

"Getting what?"

"I don't like being touched," Andrew supplies.

Neil groans frustratedly. "That's not an answer."

"It is. If you don't like it, feel free to change the question." Andrew shot back.

Neil huffed, and only grew more frustrated when Roland looked at him the same way Wymack had that morning.

"What's outside of Coach's paygrade?" Neil asked. Because Wymack and Andrew had had that confusing exchange so many times.

Andrew stills, and Roland raises an eyebrow.

"Coach promised to stay out of our personal lives when we signed our contracts. He said he doesn't get paid enough to interfere." Andrew finally answers.

Neil feels more confused than before, and he honestly feels like pulling his hair out at this point.

"But *I'm not* your personal problem," Neil says, "You hate me."

"Every inch of you," Andrew says taking a sip of the drink Roland had finally gotten around to placing in front of him, "That doesn't mean I wouldn't blow you."

Neil's immediate reaction was to laugh. Laughter exited him, and it only stopped when he realized neither Roland nor Andrew were laughing along.

"Wait you're joking... Right?" Neil asked.

Roland visibly winced, and Andrew glanced at Neil. Neil could see the way Andrew's shoulders were tensed.

"You have to tell me that you're joking," Neil repeated.

Andrew's jaw clenches, "Is it going to be a problem Wesninski?"

"Yes!" Neil said, out of the corner of his eye Roland tensed. " Fuck you could do so much better."

Andrew's eyes snap up to Neil's face.

"I mean hell," Neil continued," How low are your fucking standards."

"He's kidding right?" Roland asks turning to Andrew. "Like he's actually joking around right?"

"Of course I'm not kidding!" Neil said," Anyone with eyes could see that I'm a low bar."

Neil hears a whistle from down the bar and he looks up to see a man staring at him. The man jerks his head upwards, smirks, and then winks.

Neil points ,"Roland one of your customers is having a seizure again."

Roland glances back at Neil, both him and Andrew had seen the display as well.

"No Neil," Roland said, "He purposefully did that because he finds you attractive."

"Then someone needs to take his fucking keys," Neil responded. "He's too drunk to drive. While you're at it, cut him off completely."

Andrew wasn't looking at Neil anymore, he was looking at Roland's face.

"You of all people shouldn't be attracted to me," Neil muttered.

That gets Andrew to jerk back towards Neil. Neil's sure it's the wording that causes the rage in Andrew's eyes, the assumption.

"You've seen me shirtless," Neil said, "Just earlier today. I thought you had an eidetic memory! You've seen how disgusting I am. I am a mess of scar tissue and broken parts."

Neil's voice had taken on a desperate tone. And Andrew's clenched jaw had slackened.

Neil looked away from Andrew only to have his chin grabbed. Andrew held Neil's chin in a firm grasp. His eyes were fierce and burning. Pure honesty flowed in them, and it left Neil at a loss for words.

"Listen Abram," Andrew used Neil's middle name. And Neil's eyes went wide at the fact that he had. Hardly anyone but Kevin and Jean did, "You're skin may tell lies, but I *never* have."

Neil's heart hammered in his chest, and the response caught in his throat.

Andrew released Neil's chin, and walked back to the table.

Neil had about a million other arguments to counter Andrew's attraction to him, but they all died after that exchange.

Roland chuckled from beside Neil.

"I thought you were going to be a dick about him being gay for you or something," Roland said. "I probably would have kicked your ass."

"I don't care that he's gay," Neil responded, "I care that he deserves better."

"Kid," Roland said, "Trust me when I say that you're a fucking catch."

Neil stared at his hands, and Neil hears Roland sigh.

"Go dance or something Neil," Roland says. "Try not to think about it."

Neil didn't listen. Instead he went outside, and sat on the ground. He thought about Andrew's words, and tried to calm the rapid beating of his heart when he thought about hazel eyes.

Chapter 37

When Neil and Andrew arrived back at the tower on Sunday with the rest of their group, Neil took one look at his English homework and decided he was fucked.

"Fucking stupid ass pre-requisites," Neil muttered angrily to himself as he stuffed his English textbook into his bag, "I don't need English for Exy. I don't need English to be a math major. But no. I have to sit and write a fucking paper that I won't even remember in three fucking months."

Andrew watched from the window. His eyes glinted as his gaze was on Neil.

Neil's breath caught in his throat. His mind went to Andrew's confession.

Neil turned away, blushing. Neil hurried out the door and to the library, trying not to run. If he ran Abby would be pissed.

Neil went to one of the computers and logged on, before pulling out his cursed English book and beginning to type.

He was startled out of his focus when someone pulled out a chair next to him. Neil's eyes shot over to find Katelyn.

"Hi!" She says smiling happily.

Neil pauses, unsure how to respond.

"Uh... Hi."

He figured he nailed it.

"I've been needing to talk with you," Katelyn said.

Neil panned around himself for a moment, trying to make sure that Katelyn indeed meant him.

"Me?" Neil asked.

Katelyn nodded. "It's about Aaron."

Neil waited for Katelyn to continue.

"He and Andrew have some sort of deal you know," Katelyn said, "Neither date, nor have friends, and they stick by each other's sides."

Neil glanced at Katelyn. He thought in his mind that there must be more to that deal than just that, but Katelyn continued before he could follow that train of thought.

"I love Aaron," Katelyn said, "But we can't be a normal couple with Andrew around. And at first that was fine, but... after being able to hang around with Aaron and openly be his girlfriend, it hurts to be shoved back in his closet like a dirty secret."

Neil didn't understand what he was supposed to do with this information.

"Why does he need to hide you anyways?" Neil asked.

"Because Andrew would hurt me otherwise," Katelyn said. "I guess he's done it in the past."

Neil falters at that. But then he thinks about it. Honesty and promises meant a lot to Andrew. And if Aaron and Andrew had made a deal, then Andrew would follow through with that deal no matter what.

Neil blew a stray piece of hair from in front of his eyes, and mentally logged to ask Allison for a haircut.

"How am I supposed to help?" Neil asked.

Katelyn shrugged, "I noticed you and Andrew had a... thing... and I figured if anyone could get him to listen it'd be you."

Neil stares. If he hadn't just found out that Andrew, in a blatant show of bad taste, found him attractive, then Neil would have had no clue what she meant. But instead now Neil flushed red.

"Was I really the only one who didn't notice he found me attractive?" Neil asked more to himself than anyone else.

"No!" Katelyn said hurriedly, "As far as I know only Seth, Kevin, Jean, and Renee know."

Neil frowned because Abby, Wymack, and Betsy also knew. That was half the fucking team.

He pushed it away and tried to focus on what Katelyn was saying.

"I tried to tell Aaron that he and Andrew could see Betsy together," Neil said, "But I don't think I convinced him. Maybe you could try to convince him."

Katelyn sighed heavily, "I *tried* to convince him after he shot Drake," Katelyn said, "He said Besty isn't worth what they pay her and moved on. I tried to convince him the day after he came back from break too, but he still said no."

"Then make it about you," Neil said, "You have just as much a right as he does to feel safe and happy in your relationship. Make him fight to keep you."

"That doesn't seem fair," Katelyn said.

"It's not fair that he's putting you in this position to begin with," Neil said back.

Katelyn sighed. "And what about Andrew? How are you going to get him to listen?"

"I'll think of something," Neil said. "I can handle him."

"I would hope so," Katelyn says giggling, "You two being in a relationship and all."

Neil hadn't realized he'd started fidgeting with his pencil until it snapped in his hand at those words.

Katelyn was startled and then looked at Neil's expression.

"I'm sorry," Katelyn said, throwing her hands up, "I honestly thought that was what was going on there. I mean you didn't discount it at the beginning of the conversation."

Neil thought back to the start of the conversation, and he almost face palmed at how he hadn't caught the wording.

"I thought you just meant his attraction to me," Neil said. There was a slight frantic edge to his voice.

Katelyn seemed to falter, "Yeah but don't you like him back?"

Neil's mind went blank. Because he hadn't entertained that idea.

"Nevermind," Katelyn said quickly. "Uh... good luck with your paper by the way... it looks like you have a lot to get done."

Katelyn left Neil to his work, but the work sat undone for the rest of the night.

After classes on Monday, Neil tried to convince Abby to let him run light Raven drills at practice.

"Neil," Abby said, "I can't let you play like this."

"It's just light drills," Neil said, "I am buzzing with nervous energy and thoughts. Just let me run a few drills. Enough to work up a sweat. I won't even be running."

Abby frowned but then stared at Neil's shaking hands and sighed.

"Alright," Abby said, "Fine. But you and Betsy need to find some other coping mechanisms that aren't exercise. Only light drills, and only for the last thirty minutes of practice. I will be watching to ensure you don't go too hard."

Neil nodded and promised he'd be careful.

Waiting for the last thirty minutes of practice was a method of torture that Riko should have tried out. Wymack watched as Neil shifted over and over again in his seat.

Wymack didn't comment though, and Neil was thankful. He didn't know how to explain that he was thinking himself into the ground because his roommate was sexually attracted to him, and apparently someone thought Neil was sexually attracted right back.

Neil wasn't even sure how to go about figuring out the feeling.

The last thirty minutes of practice, Neil did his best to balance the line of going hard enough that he could work through his thoughts, and easy enough that Abby didn't pull him.

Neil didn't talk to anyone on the way off the court and into the showers, he didn't see the need. Not when his head was so full of thoughts.

"Is he okay?" Neil heard Nicky ask Matt, "He seems not okay."

Neil didn't bother to pause at that, instead he grabbed his clothes and went to the shower. He put his clothes somewhere they wouldn't get wet, and then he turned on the water.

Neil heard the other showers turning on, one by one.

Neil let his thoughts run. It was like Katelyn had handed him the final piece of the puzzle. Neil knew he had all the pieces. But he wasn't sure if he wanted to put them together to see the final picture.

But maybe out of some form of blatant masochism, he did it anyway.

At first Neil leaned his head against the tile and tried to imagine arms wrapping around him, pulling him close and—

Neil had to grip the wall to keep those thoughts from going any further, he could sense the memories threatening to envelope him whole.

Neil took a steadying breath before trying again. Taking Katelyn's words to heart and imaging Andrew touching him. But Neil's mind was a fucked up place, and he ripped himself out of that the second that Andrew's face took on Riko's disgusting smile.

Neil turned the water on as hot as it would go, letting the water burn him back into reality.

Neil thought back to Halloween, when the foxes said Sex was supposed to feel good. Neil's brain didn't have a reference for that.

Neil thought about how Andrew touched him when they were sitting in the window. Thought of how Andrew had grabbed his chin while at Eden's.

Neil transferred that tone to his other fantasy. He imagined Andrew pushing him against the wall. He imagined those hands on his hips.

Then he didn't have to force it, because Neil's mind was running with it all by itself.

Neil halted the thoughts. He stared wide eyed at the wall, and he came to the frightening conclusion that he was fucked.

Neil had gotten hard while thinking about his team mate in the locker room.

"Fuck," Neil muttered, forgetting that he wasn't alone.

Neil had no clue what he was doing. The ravens had gotten Neil hard before, it had been a way to make Neil feel shame. But Neil had never liked when they touched him. And Neil had

never once touched himself. He'd never felt the need, and honestly something about it had always felt wrong.

Neil turned the shower as cold as he possibly could. It didn't work, his mind still flashing to Andrew every other second.

None of the fantasies were bad. Neil was sure that he'd have enjoyed them if he wasn't so fucked in the head.

Neil takes a shaking hand and wraps it around his dick, and immediately releases it at the sensation. His hand slams back against the wall.

"Neil?" Matt's voice says, "Are you alright man? Do you need help?"

I think you need some help Nate.

"NO!" Neil shouted. He made himself sink to the ground in a shaking ball of emotions and fear.

If anyone touched him at the moment. *Anyone*. Neil would flip.

Just go away. Just go away. Just GO away.

"Okay." Matt said, "Alright, no one is coming in. what do you need?"

He needed not to get an erection while thinking about his team mate. But it was too late for that now.

The water was cold as it cascaded down around him.

"Betsy," Neil choked out, "I need Betsy."

"Okay man," Matt says, "Where's your phone?"

Neil's breathing was labored. He couldn't formulate a response.

"His phone is in his locker," Andrew's voice cuts in.

And fuck, Andrew's voice was the one thing Neil both *wanted* and *couldn't have* at the moment.

Neil heard walking.

Neil's erection stood between his legs. And his face colored in shame the more he saw it. He felt like crying, but he didn't.

Instead he continued to hyperventilate.

"Stop it," Andrew's voice said.

And Neil's temper flared.

"Don't talk!" Neil snapped, "Stop talking! Leave me alone!"

"Neil—"

Neil felt vulnerable and exposed. He felt scared and confused. He felt broken and destroyed. His mind was falling apart all because he got a hard on for his teammate.

A broken whine exited Neil's mouth, and he was barely able to breathe out a helpless, "No."

The room went silent.

"Out," Andrew said sternly, "Leave his phone by the door."

"Andrew—"

"We are leaving Wesninski," Andrew said, "Once the door closes, everyone will be out. Get dressed, call Betsy."

The words weren't meant to have a response back. And Neil was thankful because he wouldn't have been able to if he tried.

Neil heard the others getting dressed. He heard footsteps. And then he heard the door shut. Neil waited a few moments. Hated how he waited a few moments to see if they were actually gone. Hated his momentary lack of trust.

But eventually they were gone, and Neil managed to shut off the water and tug on his clothes. He stumbled, his erection tenting his shorts.

Shame colored his face. Something was so very wrong with him. He stumbled around with his phone.

Betsy answered after the first ring.

"Neil?" Betsy asked. Then she must have heard Neil's labored breathing, "Neil what's wrong?"

Neil choked on his words for a moment, "It won't— It won't go away."

"What won't go away Neil?" Betsy asked.

Neil choked on his words again.

"I got hard— I got hard and I don't know what to do. I can't even—"

Neil choked on the rest of his words again and finally began to cry. He felt helpless. Unable to control his own body. Unable to touch himself without his mind thinking it was someone else's hand. He couldn't even finish the fantasy in his head without it turning into a fucking nightmare. He hunched over and pressed his face into the floor.

Neil had gotten erections before. Neil doesn't know a man out there who hadn't woken up with morning wood before. And the Ravens had stimulated him before, so that he could feel shameful over "liking it". But Neil had never masterbated. He got by with a cold shower for the natural ones. And for the ones the Ravens gave him— well Neil didn't like to think about those.

"I'll be right there," Betsy said. "We have a session anyways. I can drive you. You need to regulate your breathing. Is Andrew—"

"No!" Neil said fiercely, "I don't want anyone touching me!"

Neil heard Betsy take a deep breath. "Alright," She said, "Can you name some things around you?"

Neil's mind paused for a moment, his immediate thoughts going to answering the question.

"There are showers," Neil said.

"Good!" Betsy praised, "How many?"

"Seven," Neil responded.

He continued to name things in the room, counting how many there were, and telling Betsy the number. Until finally, *finally*, the panic subsided, and his erection finally went away.

Betsy hung up when she pulled up to the court. And Neil could hear the moment she arrived.

"Betsy!" Neil heard Allison say through the door, "Why are you here?"

"Neil called me," Betsy responded kindly, "He asked me to come. Can you tell me where he is?"

"Showers," Seth says, "Is he alright?"

There's a moment of hesitation, maybe Betsy was working on what to respond with.

"The fact that he called me means he's doing better," Betsy says, "And I think that that should be all you guys worry about for now. He reached out for help. He did good."

Neil heard a knock.

"Neil, can I come in?" Betsy asked.

"Yeah," Neil chokes out.

The door pushes open, and Neil stands up.

"Can we go to your office?" Neil asks.

Betsy nods and guides Neil through the door.

The foxes make the mistake of converging.

"Neil—"

"Hey man—"

"Abram—"

"Bro—"

"NO!"

Neil's voice echoes off the walls. The foxes' eyes are all wide.

"Neil needs space right now guys," Betsy said, "I'm sure you all can understand that."

The foxes step back and Neil keeps his face pointed towards the ground.

The drive to Betsy's is filled with Neil's thought process.

"I'm attracted to Andrew," Neil says quietly once they get to the office, "Sexually attracted I mean."

Betsy pauses in moving towards her chair, and glances at Neil.

"That's fine—"

"It's not!"

Betsy finally sits down in her chair. She stares at Neil.

"Are you upset that you're attracted to a male?" Betsy asked.

"No!" Neil says, "I'm upset that I'm attracted to anyone at all! I've been used for sex my whole life. Sex is like torture to me. Why the fuck would I want more torture?"

It wasn't the only thought on his mind either.

"The last person I was attracted to fucking raped me. What if things change? We are both attracted to each other, but I can't do that. I don't want—"

Neil's breathing picks up.

"That and Andrew deserves better than whatever broken parts he gets if he ends up with me!"

Neil falls back against the wall, his head thumping against it as he starts to cry.

"I can't even touch myself," Neil says quietly, "I can't even deal with my own fucking hard on, without seeing them."

Rage courses through him. And he hits the ground with his fist as angry tears roll down his cheeks. He takes a deep sobbing breath.

"WHY DID THEY DO THIS TO ME!? I DON'T UNDERSTAND! I WAS SIX WHEN THIS STARTED! WHY DO I FUCKING DESERVE THIS SHIT!?"

Neil slams his head against the wall.

"Fucking GOD LOVING people tell me that God gives us what we deserve, and that he only gives us what we can handle!"

Neil punches the ground again and screams. The emotions piling up in his chest like a dam being broken by water. He punches the ground again, and pain shoots up his arm.

"I don't want to deserve this anymore," His voice comes out quiet as he brings his hands up to hide his face. "TELL ME WHAT I HAVE TO DO TO DESERVE BETTER! BECAUSE I CAN'T HANDLE THIS ANYMORE!!!"

Neil fell back against the wall, his entire body exhausted. His hands hurt. His mind felt obliterated.

"Neil," Betsy says, and she was suddenly sitting on the floor with him. "You didn't deserve any of it."

But that was so much harder to accept. It was so much harder to understand someone doing that just to see Neil in pain.

At least if he deserved it, then there was a reason why. Otherwise it was just senseless violence. Otherwise Neil went through that simply because sick fucks existed in the world. And suddenly then the world would become so much crueler.

Neil sagged though, because he knew it was true. He'd been dealt the shittiest hand imaginable. He'd been beaten, bruised, raped, torn down. And there was no other reason than "because they could".

A reason so pathetic it made Neil's mouth feel like ash.

"I know," Neil said, "I know I didn't deserve it."

Tears fell from his eyes as he admitted it though. And he fell forward onto Betsy's shoulder.

"It doesn't make it easier Bee," Neil cried. "It doesn't make anything easier."

"I know," Betsy said, soothing Neil's hair. "I know."

"I'm attracted to Andrew," Neil said.

"He's a good person to feel that for," Betsy said. "You know he'll never cross a boundary you lay out."

"I got an erection," Neil said.

"Perfectly natural," Betsy says.

"I couldn't even touch myself," Neil said.

"You're still healing. It takes time." Betsy responded.

Neil's body gave out completely, and Betsy held him up.

"You'll be okay," Betsy said, "You're going to be okay."

And Neil began to believe those words.

Betsy booked Neil another appointment for Tuesday, alongside Neil's Wednesday appointment. Neil didn't do much after his admission. He was tired and drained. He was ready to go back to the tower and sleep. Betsy noticed, as she always did. And she drove Neil back to the tower. She led Neil up the stairs, and back to his dorm.

Neil had left his keys at the court, so he had to knock.

Andrew opened the door, looking as apathetic as always.

He's a safe person to feel that for. He'll never cross a boundary you lay out.

Neil steps inside without a second thought.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Betsy smiles.

Neil nods, too tired to respond, and Andrew shuts the door.

At around ten at night, Kevin came and knocked on Neil and Andrew's door. Andrew grabbed his keys and got up at the same time that Neil left the bean bag chair.

Neil had forgotten that he didn't have to drive Kevin and Jean to the court anymore. Neil quickly sat back down, and Andrew opened the door.

Andrew stepped out, and was just about to close the door when Kevin spoke.

"Aren't you coming?" Kevin asked.

And Neil glanced over at Kevin, "I haven't been cleared to play yet," Neil said.

Kevin gave Neil a look like Neil was stupid.

"I meant so that you can train Seth and Nicky." Kevin said, "You've gotten Seth to the point he got a pro deal. Don't tell me you're giving up teaching them now."

Neil hadn't, he just didn't want to put up with the bickering that came with Seth and Kevin being in the same room.

But Andrew was also going to be there.

"Give me a minute," Neil says, getting up and going to the bedroom.

Kevin makes an irritated face when Neil reemerged carrying a megaphone.

Driving to the court was entertaining. Neil put Seth and Kevin with Andrew. And Jean, Nicky, and Neil ended up in the second car.

Neil had to bribe Andrew with ice cream for that seating arrangement. But the peace and quiet was worth it.

Andrew had a scowl on his face when he got out of his car, and he glared at Neil.

"What did they argue about this time?" Neil asked, "Was it about classical vs rock music? Or maybe it was about the best type of tennis shoe? Oh I know! The moon and whether or not aliens exist!"

Andrew glared harder. "You owe me three tubs of ice cream for that."

"That's fair," Neil responds.

Neil and Andrew sat on the sidelines as they watched the others play. Neil threw in the occasional helpful word using his megaphone.

All in all, things moved smoothly until Seth set out his cones to run precision drills.

Then Kevin had a goddamn aneurysm.

"Seth!" Kevin said pointing at the cones, "They aren't straight enough."

Neil thanked his head on the court wall. But he didn't say anything, hoping Kevin would just get over his stupid bullshit.

Kevin didn't.

"It doesn't matter," Seth gritted out.

"It does—"

"KEVIN," Neil shouted into his megaphone, "HALF THIS FUCKING ROOM ISN'T STRAIGHT!!! JUST SHOOT THE FUCKING BALLS!!!"

Kevin grumbled, and flipped Neil off. But he finally got to work.

Seth got to work as well, and Jean and Nicky went back to their drills too.

Next to Neil, Andrew's mouth held the slightest quirk of a smirk. And Neil realized how fucked he truly was.

When they got back to the dorm, Andrew went to the bathroom and changed for bed. Neil, meanwhile, laid on his bed without changing. Andrew got back, and started arranging his pillows for bed.

"I got an erection today," Neil said.

Then his face burned red, because he definitely hadn't planned on saying that out loud.

Andrew, meanwhile, took it in stride. Andrew simply finished making up his bed, before crawling into it.

Neil knew he was listening though, because Andrew glanced at him as a sign to continue.

"That's why I freaked out," Neil said.

He wasn't ready to tell Andrew the full truth. But he could tell him this part of it.

"I couldn't touch myself without thinking it was them," Neil said.

Andrew was silent for a moment, "Did you close your eyes?"

"Yes."

"Keep them open next time," Andrew responds, "Look at your hand so you know it's your own."

That sounded worse. And Neil's face colored in shame. But before Neil could go back to staring at the wall, Andrew spoke again.

"There's nothing wrong with you for getting an erection," Andrew said. "Your sexual attraction is something they couldn't take from you."

Neil didn't say anything. He didn't want to admit that those words eased an edge in Neil's chest.

"They made it hard for me to follow those urges though," Neil said, "They took that from me."

"Then take it back." Andrew responded.

The words sounded so simple. But Neil knew they weren't. And yet he found something in himself wanted to try.

On Tuesday, Neil went to Betsy's again.

"Should I tell him?" Neil asked before Betsy even got her greeting out.

Betsy smiled, apparently getting used to Neil's straight-to-the-point attitude.

"That's completely up to you," Betsy said.

Neil chewed his lip.

"I'm not ready for sex though," Neil said, "Isn't mutual attraction like... instant consent. I don't like that."

"Neil, how much do you understand about consent?" Betsy asked.

Neil hesitated before responding. "Probably less than I think I do."

Betsy nodded and pulled up a clip on her computer. It was the stupidest thing to watch in the world. Consent being related to a cup of tea. He felt like a child when being shown it.

But by the end of it, certain things were clearer.

"If your boundaries are 'it's a no until it's a yes'," Betsy said, "Then people must follow those Neil. It is your body, you get to decide who sees it and touches it."

"So how do I get okay with it?" Neil asked, "Do I just force myself to sleep with someone?"

"Absolutely not," Betsy said, " This takes time, and it's not that simple. Baby steps are important Neil. Things like being kissed may already be hard enough. Set boundaries and slowly, when you are ready, unlock them."

Come Wednesday Neil and Betsy had a much longer discussion about consent. They had a conversation about boundaries. They had a conversation about deserving again.

Betsy didn't blame Neil for reverting backwards, for having to have certain things re-explained. She just understandingly helped Neil tear down his destructive thought he'd been trying to build up as a wall again.

"I know it doesn't seem like it's healing right now," Betsy said when Neil sat in the corner staring at the ceiling, "But it's important. And years from now you'll look back and realize that."

Neil got home, and saw Andrew sitting in the window. He was wearing a tank top, and his black armbands accentuated his muscles even more than normal.

But on second thought, that also may be because Neil was apparently entering his own brand of sexual frustration.

Neil flushed red and walked off to the bedroom.

On Thursday, Neil was cleared for the court. He practically vaulted the fucking wall to get into the court. And in seconds he was off. Taking laps, checking people, shooting on Andrew.

And not, fucking scoring. Because someone thought it would be a good idea to put a golden God in fucking goal.

Neil called Betsy afterwards.

"How do I get it to stop?" Neil asked, "It's now interfering with how I play. I couldn't score once on Andrew today. NOT ONCE!!!"

Andrew was waiting in the car, the others had gone back to the Tower. But Andrew had stayed behind to wait for Neil when Neil said he needed to call Bee.

Wymack watched from his office door with a raised eyebrow.

Neil paced as he talked.

"Maybe you should try telling him," Betsy suggested.

"Or I could jump off a bridge and all my problems would be gone," Neil responded.

"Neil—"

"I know I know. The longer I say concerning things, the longer I'm on watch," Neil said. "I'm aware."

"You already know he finds you attractive as well," Betsy says, "So you know he won't judge you."

"Yeah but what if he takes attraction for consent," Neil said.

"He won't," Betsy said, "I can promise you that."

Neil groaned. "This is hard. I'm hard. Everything IS FUCKING HARD!!!"

Neil had gone from, terrified, to thoughtful to fucking pissed off in a matter of a week. He blamed Andrew.

It was Andrew's fault that Neil couldn't focus.

Neil hung up the phone with Betsy after a few more exchanges of words. Wymack stood in the door.

"At least you finally figured it out," Wymack said.

Neil had kind of taken over Wymack's office for his conversation with Betsy, so he wasn't mad the man had stayed.

Neil hears a knock on the door, and Wymack yells to whoever it was to come in.

It was Andrew, and of fucking course the man had to look like a fucking muscled God.

A person Neil could feel safe with.

Of fucking course his eyes had to look like pools of molten gold. Making Neil's heart flutter in his chest.

And OF FUCKING COURSE he leaned against the door in a way that had Neil's mouth go dry.

"This is your fault!" Neil said pointing at Andrew.

Andrew looked over at coach with a raised eyebrow. But Neil couldn't stop the perpetual word vomit exiting his lips.

"I was fine! I was fine being an ignorant fuck with no knowledge of my own sexual attraction. But no. You had to go and flick the switch! There were plenty of other people who helped. But I blame you. Did you know your eyes literally make my heart stutter in my chest? Fuck you for that by the way! And fuck you for the short sleeves that show off your arms too! I'm over here struggling with my fucking sexuality, and you have to stand there looking like sex on legs every two seconds. AND YOU'RE NOT EVEN TRYING!!! Do you know how many times I've heard the fucking consent talk this week. TOO MANY!!! Because apparently my idea of consent is a little fucking screwed when it comes to people touching *me* . And apparently my thinking on mutual attraction suddenly meaning sex was wrong. WHICH I'M STILL TRYING TO WRAP MY HEAD AROUND BY THE WAY!!! And I'm still trying to get over the fact that Riko and you have been the only two people I've ever been attracted to.. And in the midst of my mental break down, and the fact that I literally cannot look at you for five seconds without wondering how it would be if you pinned me against a fucking wall... YOU CAN'T EVEN HAVE THE HUMAN DECENCY TO HAVE A BAD FUCKING HAIR DAY!!!"

Neil didn't think that Andrew could look shocked. But it certainly did not look like Andrew had been expecting to walk into that.

Neil's face burned red.

"Oh fuck I wasn't ready to say that yet," Neil panicked.

Neil began to hyperventilate. He didn't want things to change. He didn't want things to be different. He just wanted to move at his own pace and—

"Yes or no?" Andrew's voice cut through Neil's mindset like a knife.

"No." Neil said. Aware that he rarely ever told Andrew No. Neil expected the no to be ignored, afterall he had just said he was attracted to Andrew.

But Andrew didn't move, in fact his hands remained pushed deep inside his pockets.

"This doesn't change anything Abram," Andrew says. "No still means no. Yes still means yes. You're still annoying. And I still hate you."

The words made Neil relax, his arms falling to his sides. The way that Andrew had said Neil's name, made Neil's heart flutter.

Andrew left for the car. And Wymack looked at Neil with a raised eyebrow.

"Is this going to be a problem?" Wymack asked.

Neil let out a long, relieved breath.

"No Coach." Neil said, "It's not."

Chapter 38

Neil and Andrew had established a routine since becoming roommates. Neil woke up first. He'd wake up and use the restroom, brushing his teeth and fluffing around his curls. Then he'd dress and leave the bathroom to make the coffee. Andrew would get up and enter the bathroom after Neil left the bedroom. Andrew would prepare himself for the day, then he would meet Neil in the kitchen, stealing a cup of coffee for himself.

But on Friday morning Neil exited the bathroom and found himself looking at a very unkempt Andrew in the kitchen.

Neil's mouth opened and closed silently as he watched Andrew brew the coffee. Andrew's blonde hair was in disarray. Andrew's arms were bare. The shirt Andrew wore was skin tight. Neil watched as Andrew's back muscles flexed with the movement of Andrew's arms.

A dying sound exited Neil's mouth. "Fuck you! This was on purpose!"

Andrew turns and glances at Neil. Blonde strands of hair fell in his hazel eyes, and the fact that it was so obviously awful but that Andrew still looked good, pissed Neil off.

"Yes junkie," Andrew said bored, "I did get out of bed. And make coffee on purpose."

Neil's face turns red when Andrew turns to face him.

Neil remembered his words about Andrew never having a bad hair day. Now Neil was wondering if it was even possible. Even with his hair unstyled and uncombed, Andrew still looked good as fuck.

"This isn't fair," Neil said, "Even when you've just rolled out of bed you look good."

Andrew stares at Neil," That sounds like a personal problem. And speaking of personal problems—"

Andrew points to Neil's groin, and Neil flushes.

"I'm getting really sick of cold showers," Neil mutters while going to the bathroom.

Neil had two classes to attend that morning before the foxes headed to the airport. The weather ensured that Neil had a tough time getting to classes. Neil was concerned the flight was going to get canceled.

After his last class of the day Neil moved quickly with getting back to the tower. He shivered, not really having a winter coat, he'd only shrugged on a sweatshirt before leaving.

Rain was falling from the sky, but it was cold enough that it was freezing when it hit the ground. Neil made his way up the hill to fox tower, and that's when he wiped out.

Neil slipped and fell onto the ground. He winced and checked himself over for injuries.

"You okay Bro?" Seth's voice cut through Neil's check of his injuries.

Matt, Seth, and Nicky all stood together.

"Yeah," Neil said, slightly relieved he wasn't injured. It would have been hell to have been benched again. "Just cold."

"You should have worn the jacket I got you!" Nicky exclaimed.

Neil paused, and had to think for a moment. He knew sometimes he could be rather absentminded about the smaller shit. He felt like he deserved as much, considering all the bigger shit he had to worry about. But he didn't remember Nicky getting him a jacket.

Neil furrowed his eyebrows as Seth helped him up, "What jacket?"

Nicky's eyes went wide and he slapped his forehead, "Oh God I forgot to give you it. I'm so sorry. Come on. I'll give it to you now."

Neil followed them into Fox Tower. The lobby was slick with water, and caution signs littered the floor.

Neil found it amusing that the four of them still slipped all the way to the elevator. The elevator itself had puddles of standing water. Neil felt sorry for whoever had to mop the floors after the storm outside was over.

When they finally made it to the carpeted floor, it was a relief.

Neil was shoved into Aaron and Nicky's room. Nicky went into the bedroom.

Neil heard Seth bark out a laugh, and watched as he showed Matt something on his phone.

Matt laughed too.

"Oh God," Matt said, "She's going to kill whoever took that picture."

Seth laughed, "Dan is they one who snapped it."

"Looks like I've just lost my girlfriend," Matt says with a smile.

Seth notices Neil watching and flips the phone and shows Neil the screen. At first, Neil didn't recognize the person in the photograph, but then he saw their eyes.

"Oh my God," Neil muttered, "Her hair—"

Matt and Seth break off into peels of laughter. On the phone screen was a dripping wet Allison, her hair a stringy mess hanging in her face and eyes. And her eyes were filled with rage.

"How much do you want to bet that she's going to have to be carried out to the car because she's refusing to leave?" Matt grinned.

"No question about that," Neil says, looking at the photo again.

"So are you in for the bet?" Matt asked.

Neil glanced at Matt. Neil knew the foxes were obsessive gamblers, but this was the first time they were inviting Neil to join in on a bet.

"I don't really bet," Neil said.

"You too?" Matt asked, shaking his head, "You and Andrew are like twins sometimes."

Neil almost said, *I hope we aren't twins, that would have made the past week incredibly weird.* But he refrained.

"I'd like to think I'm nicer," Neil said.

Matt grinned, "No you're just a louder asshole, thereby more entertaining."

Neil scowled, and Matt laughed. Seth was raiding Nicky and Aaron's kitchen. And Nicky seemed to be having a tough time finding whatever he was looking for.

"But you seriously don't want in on any bets?" Matt asked. "We've currently got sixteen ongoing bets, and you haven't joined any of them."

"He's only allowed to join fourteen of them," Seth said with a mouthful of food, "He can't join on bets about himself."

"Seth, don't talk with your mouth full," Neil said. "And one, I've never been invited to join a bet. And Two, I don't bet."

"Dude you're not invited you just throw money into the pool," Seth said, "Though I guess, like we said, you kind of have to know about the bet first. Two of them you can't know about."

"Why not?" Neil asked.

"Because putting money on yourself is cheating," Seth responded. Then his eyes glimmered, "But there's nothing that says you can't settle them for us."

"Yeah!" Nicky says suddenly reemerging, "Like we've got a bet on what your sexuality is right now."

Neil had known about this one since back before Andrew was off his medication. Back then, Neil hadn't been sure. But now he was even more unsure.

Betsy and he had talked about it at length, trying to get around the roadblock of Neil feeling fucked up because he'd been attracted to one of his rapists.

"I've been discussing it with Betsy," Neil said, "She told me it's not as black and white as gay, straight, and bi."

The three older males furrowed their eyebrows in confusion. And Neil sighed.

"Betsy said I probably fall somewhere on the Ace spectrum," Neil said, "It feels the most right. I think I'm more Gray- Asexual... At least from looking at the definitions."

Matt, Seth, and Nicky looked even more confused.

"Asexual?" Seth asked.

"Spectrum?" Nicky said.

"Gray-Asexual?" Matt asked.

Neil sighed. Betsy had said that the asexual Spectrum wasn't really spoken about. Neil fidgeted uncomfortably, and Nicky noticed.

"We aren't discounting that Neil," Nicky said hurriedly, "We just really don't know what that is."

Neil flushes and nods. "Asexuality means that you don't feel sexual attraction. But it's on a spectrum, because you may be asexual, but you only ever feel sexual attraction for maybe two people through your entire life. Then you have the people who don't want sex at all. Gray-asexual covers the first group. But... uh... that's all I know... I'm still learning."

Neil flushes, expecting them to say what he'd thought when he first heard about asexuality.

It's because of your trauma.

Neil didn't think it was because of his trauma though. Because obviously he was feeling the sexual attraction now.

None of the three elders said anything to that extent though. Nicky just sighed.

"Damnit," Nicky said, "And here I was thinking I had a chance to end up with you bending me over one day."

Matt snorted, and Seth laughed. Neil flushed red, but a small smile made its way onto his face.

"Learn something new every day," Seth said nodding, "Hey did you guys know that there is a name for being sexually attracted to morons? It's called Morosexual."

"You're making that up," Matt said.

"It would explain why Allison is with Seth though," Nicky muttered.

"Hey!"

Nicky ignored Seth, and placed a black jacket into Neil's lap.

"Merry late Christmas," Nicky said sheepishly.

Neil stared at the jacket in awe, his fingers dancing lightly over the fabric. It was the first gift he'd ever been given.

Nicky noticed Neil's expression. "Have you never been given a Christmas gift before Neil?"

Neil shrugged, "I've never been given a gift before. Sorry, I didn't get you guys anything."

"You totally did!" Seth said, "I got a pro offer like a day before Christmas. Best gift ever."

"I didn't—"

But Seth holds up a hand to shut Neil up.

"Not enough time to argue about that," Seth said, "We've all got to get moving if we want to get to the airport on time."

Neil was hurriedly shoved out of the room and pointed to his own. Neil almost argued that they still had an hour, but he had a sinking suspicion that Seth had shoved Neil out of the room just to avoid an argument about the role Neil had to play in Seth's pro offer.

Neil smiled and shook his head, before going into his own room.

Andrew was sitting in the window, and Neil smirked.

"I figured out your sexuality," Neil said with a shit eating grin.

Andrew paused while smoking his cigarette.

"Remembering I told you that I was gay," Andrew says glancing at Neil, "Does not count as figuring something out."

Neil laughed. "No," Neil said, "You're Morosexual."

Andrew gazes at Neil, maybe not understanding what that means.

"You're attracted to morons," Neil grinned.

There is a solid five seconds of silence.

"You do realize that by insulting my taste you're just insulting yourself?" Andrew said.

"When am I not insulting myself?"

"90% Wesninski," Andrew said.

"What's that mean?" Neil asked.

"That's the percentage of time that I want to kill you," Andrew responds.

Neil grins, "Is the other ten percent when you want to pin me against a wall? Does it go up when I do stupid shit?"

"91% Wesninski," Andrew says.

"You have just issued me a challenge," Neil grinned, "That percentage will be to 100 by the end of the day."

The Vixens beat the Foxes to the airport. The weather outside was awful. And Neil was consoled by the fact that the plane was already waiting for them at the terminal. They would be getting to the game despite the weather.

The foxes' first plane ride went quickly. But Neil noticed Andrew's anxiety through the take off. Andrew, who could sit still for hours since getting off the medication, fidgeted nervously with a pen the whole time.

When they landed Neil could see the clench to Andrew's jaw. They were alone in their row for the first plane ride, so Neil held out a hand, which Andrew took and gripped so tight that Neil thought his hand would break.

Andrew let go of Neil's hand when they finally landed. And Neil grinned at him.

"I'm your emotional support moron," Neil said.

Andrew glared.

The foxes split up in Atlanta, choosing to kill time by going through the various shops.

Neil grinned at Andrew when foxes all walked off, "We look like secret agents. Partners in crime and murder."

"Normal people would say we look like boyfriends," Andrew said.

"Since when have I been normal," Neil responds.

The two of them had stopped in the middle of the airport, and were facing each other. The collar of Andrew's jacket was pulled up, so Neil yanked his up as well. Andrew's eyes watched the motion, and then settled on Neil's face.

"You're stupid," Andrew says.

"And apparently stupid works," Neil smirks.

"For someone who was freaking out only a day ago about his sexual attraction towards me," Andrew said, "You certainly aren't shying away from flirting."

Neil frowned, "I didn't think I was flirting. Was I flirting?"

"Normal people would describe that as flirting," Andrew responds.

"Is the flirting working?" Neil asked with a shrug.

"You're insufferable," Andrew responded.

"I'm guessing insufferable works too then," Neil says nodding sagely.

Andrew and Neil end up passing Kevin, Aaron, and Nicky while going into one of the shops. Nicky and Kevin were arguing, and drawing a crowd of interested onlookers. Neil huffed and, as he passed Kevin, stuck out his foot and kicked Kevin on the ass. Luckily Andrew caught Neil's arm to steady him before Neil could fall.

Kevin yelped and then turned to Neil.

"Stop being a pissant Kevin," Neil said.

Kevin glared, "Why are you assuming it's my fault."

Neil and Andrew were still continuing on into the shop, but Neil still turned around to politely answer Kevin's question.

"It's quite simple really," Neil said, "I simply turn to my mathematical equation of Kevin."

"What's that?" Andrew asks.

"It states that If Kevin is in the room where a problem occurs, then it must be Kevin's fault. The follow up is, If Kevin is not in a room where a problem occurs, then it is still Kevin's fault."

Neil and Andrew made it over to a display of glass figurines. Andrew stopped and looked at them. His eyes cased each one carefully.

"Is that for Betsy?" Neil asked. He remembered seeing glass figurines just like it inside Betsy's office.

Andrew doesn't respond, but Neil takes his silence as a yes.

"Get her a sloth," Neil said pointing, "I've been starting a campaign in making it her favorite animal."

Andrew glances at Neil, "Why,?"

"Because they are ugly yet still somehow adorable and it gives me hope for myself." Neil responded.

Andrew ended up grabbing the sloth. Neil's not sure how he convinced the blonde, but Neil wasn't going to complain. Neil walked over to the cosmetics area after that. He found the display of nail polish and grinned. He picked up a few, More like ten, before staring at the lip glosses.

"Is there a reason you're so obsessed with makeup and nail care?" Andrew asked.

Neil flushed red, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"Is it a bad thing?" Neil asked uncomfortably.

Andrew stared at Neil for a moment, "No. But it's interesting."

"Betsy says it's probably a way for me to reclaim my body," Neil says, "Riko never let us do our makeup or nails in the next. Not even the females were allowed to. And it started as a way to piss him off, but it's kind of become a way to both send up the middle finger, and claim my body as my own. You do it by styling your hair every morning."

Andrew doesn't discount that.

"I'm not very good with makeup," Neil responded. "Allison still does it for me, but I'm getting better. And the nails I have down pat, but it's easier for someone else to do it."

Neil suddenly gets an idea.

"You should let me do your nails on the plane," Neil says with a grin, "It will distract you from the flight, and I get to paint your nails when I run out of my own fingers."

Andrew glances at Neil before picking out a black nail polish. Neil picks out a dark purple to go with it. Andrew raises an eyebrow at the purple.

Neil holds up his hand and shows Andrew his already painted nails. "It is tradition to paint the middle finger a different color."

Boarding the plane went quick enough. Renee ended up with Andrew and Neil. Kevin and Jean were directly in front of them, Wymack sitting at their side. Matt, Dan, and Abby were in front of them. And in front of them was Aaron, Seth, and Nicky. Allison ended up with two of the Vixens, one being Katelyn.

"You're letting Aaron and Nicky sit that far up?" Neil asked.

"Nicky wanted to sit with Seth," Andrew said. "Aaron sits with Nicky."

"Why is Wymack back with us?" Neil asks.

"Because I don't trust you not to piss people off, break things, or break yourself," Wymack gruffs.

Neil nods, "Okay that's fair."

Neil waits until the drinks had come around, before turning on the air above them as high as it would go. Neil takes the bottles of purple and black nail polish, and sets them on his downed tray. Beside him, Renee gets the idea and lowers her's as well. Andrew stares at Neil for a moment, before lowering his.

Neil slaps the black against his palm a few times, shaking the nail polish up, before unscrewing the cap and starting on Andrew's nails.

Neil finished the black, and did the middle finger purple. Neil blows on the nails, and waves a hand over them to dry them. Then he moves to Andrew's other hand. Once both hands were painted, Renee hands Neil a Nail pen, and Neil grins at the color options. Neil pulls his knees up to his chest and pats the top of his knee for Andrew to put his hand on. Then Neil turns on the light and points at Andrew with the end of the nail pen.

"Mess me up and I fuck you up," Neil says.

Neil went to work with different colors, making designs with Foxes and swirls. And the words "Fuck you" spelled out along Andrew's nails.

Kevin and Jean had both fallen asleep in front of them.

Neil's tongue stuck out slightly as he worked. And he could see Andrew intently watching Neil's face.

"See something you like?" Neil asked, "I didn't think I was being stupid enough to get you going at the moment."

"Wesninski I will shove my foot up your ass," Andrew said.

Neil didn't take his eyes off of Andrew's nails as he responded, "Sounds kinky. Not my thing though."

In front of them, Wymack choked.

When Neil finished Andrew's nails, He handed Andrew the purple and black bottles.

"Your turn," Neil smiles.

Neil hands Andrew his hands, and Andrew stares at them for a moment, before unscrewing the cap of the nail polish. Neil had undone his nails at the gate with the nail polish remover Renee had put in a travel container, so Andrew was able to simply apply the nail polish.

"Paint the middle one black," Neil said, "The rest purple."

Andrew glanced up at Neil and did as Neil said. Andrew was careful, and meticulous. His hands were steady. Neil could feel Andrew's calluses from playing Exy. Neil wondered what Andrew's hands would feel like on his—

Neil's face turned bright red, and a squeak exited his lips.

Renee looked at Neil confused, and Neil was glad that the tray was covering his lap.

Andrew though, fucking Andrew, had a knowing look in his eyes. And Neil saw the smallest hint of a smirk on his features. Neil glared.

"Call me Morosexual all you want," Andrew said in quiet German, "I'm not the one who got turned on by hands."

Neil used his freshly painted middle finger to flip Andrew off.

By the time they landed their trays were upright and their nails were dry.

It took a bit to get off the plane. Neil was charged with waking up Kevin. Neil did so by dumping the contents of his ice water down Kevin's shirt. Jean woke up to Kevin's yelp.

The Foxes picked their bags up from the baggage claim, and then they were herded into a van.

"Allison do you have any way you can cut my hair?" Neil asked when he settled in next to Allison, "It's gotten too long."

Allison didn't respond, but instead took out a pair of scissors and began clipping away at Neil's hair.

Wymack looked back.

"For the love of— WESNINSKI THIS IS NOT A DAMN HAIR SALON!!!"

"Why not?" Neil asked.

"WE ARE IN A MOVING VEHICLE!!! IF WE HIT A BUMP SHE COULD KILL YOU WITH THOSE SCISSORS!!!"

"Oh good," Neil said without thinking, "Do me a favor and hit every pothole."

Wymack grumbled something under his breath and Abby nodded consolingly.

The stadium was already packed when the foxes arrived. The foxes changed quickly, and then they joined Wymack on the sidelines.

"Take them on a few laps," Wymack said to Dan, "Have Wesninski leading with you."

Neil's head snaps up at that, but he sees the way Dan grins.

Neil steps in line with Dan and begins to lead the foxes in their jog.

"He's taking my advise I think," Dan said," Though I'm pretty sure he was thinking the same thing anyway."

"Thinking what?" Neil asked, confused.

Just when he thought he was up to date on everything. He starts missing shit again.

"I'll let Coach handle telling you," Dan says with a smile. "Either way you've got this."

Neil didn't understand, and now wasn't the time to start trying to figure out his cryptic teammates.

When the longhorns passed the foxes as the foxes made their way off the court, Neil sent up a silent prayer that none of the foxes would get confused by the white-on-orange home uniforms the longhorns wore. The foxes themselves were wearing orange-on-white.

"All right, listen up. It's time to get serious. These guys might look like friendlies in our colors but they're here for one reason only: to eliminate you right out of the gate. They are wannabe champions and they know what it takes to get to the next level. Your job tonight is to make them look like fools."

Abby sent Wymack a dirty look, and Wymack continued on about Neil's notes, and about the longhorn Dealers. But Neil was distracted. His eyes had drawn up to the crowd as he zoned out of what Wymack had been saying. And Neil had to grab Matt's shoulder for balance as his eyes landed on the VIP box.

Familiar eyes were settled on Neil. Neil took a few more steps back, panic threatening to explode in his chest. He almost slipped and fell, but Allison caught him.

"What the fuck are they doing here?" Allison snarled after catching Neil from falling.

Andrew's jaw was tense, "I'll ask," Andrew said. Andrew started to walk, but Wymack stopped him.

"No killing anyone Minyard!" Wymack said, grabbing Andrew's collar and hauling him back towards the group. "Jesus, I feel like I'm herding children. Neil... Neil—"

Neil snapped back to reality. He realized the entire team was looking at him in worry.

Panic was still tight in Neil's chest. But anger was a powerful contender.

"I think he misses me," Neil says, giving his signature smartass smile.

"And who wouldn't," Nicky says weakly. Neil was thankful for Nicky's jump into the conversation. "I mean come on, those hips are definitely something I'd miss."

Aaron rolled his eyes. But Seth jumped in as well. "THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN SAYING!!! He's got a great ass. A nice firm—"

Neil noticed how Andrew's eyes strayed down to Neil's ass. And a stray memory hit Neil.

"I DIDN'T SIT IN STUPIDITY!!!" Neil shouts in realization.

"Oh my God he figured it out," Kevin muttered in French.

"About fucking time," Jean muttered back.

The rest of the foxes looked confused about Neil's sudden outburst.

"I swear to god," Wymack muttered, "The next interruption I will make the culprits run a marathon. If it's about Wesninski's ass I'll make you run two."

The foxes all simmered down, and Wymack finished going over the packet. Neil stayed close to Andrew on the way out to the court for drills.

"I didn't sit in stupidity," Neil said in German, when Nicky and Aaron were far enough away. *"You were checking out my ass!!!"*

Andrew glanced at Neil, *"The fact that you only just now figured that out tells me you swam in stupidity instead of just sitting in it."*

Neil glared, *"Screw you."*

"I'd rather screw you."

Neil's mouth fell open in shock.

"Two can play that stupid little game you're playing today Wesninski," Andrew gives Neil a two fingered salute, and heads off to goal.

The game started, and Neil was thankful that he had written in his notes for the foxes to watch the Dealers. Dan's mark was a bitch.

Neil cheered when Dan practically threw the girl over her shoulder during a check. Though only seconds later the two dealers were going for each other's throats. The refs pulled the two girls apart. And both Dealers were awarded yellow-cards.

But despite the fight being broken up, the entire rest of the first half was a slew of illegal checks and fights. By the time half time came, every player on the court had a yellow card.

Abby checked all the foxes over with gentle hands at halftime.

She gave Neil a glare for the bruise on his throat, a player had pinned him during a fight. But Abby still let Neil go back out to play.

The second half brought even more fights, but it also brought the foxes plenty of penalty shots. Two of the Longhorns were red carded. The foxes had to maintain their cool the second half. They had players to spare, but they were going hard enough without the added penalty of fewer subs.

In the end the score showed seven-six, the foxes' lead.

Neil was going to bypass the reporters entirely. But the reporters shouted his name before he could. Wymack cursed under his breath when Neil halted

"Nathaniel! What do you have to say about Riko's claim that you are going to be going back to Edgar Allan?"

"Riko's always been a tiny bit delusional," Neil said. "I appreciate that he misses me so much. But I plan on staying with the foxes. The Ravens are awful human beings and the foxes are bout to take away the one thing they are all good at.. After all, the foxes are going to win championships this year."

Neil grins when more questions are shouted out, but Neil waves his hand.

When Neil turns, Riko is standing there glaring.

Neil ignores him in favor of going to the locker rooms.

Riko growls, unhappy with being ignored. But Neil had always been a little shit. And Riko hadn't broken him of that yet.

"You worthless, good for nothing, little—"

"I'm proud of you Riko," Neil cuts Riko off, "You're finally coming to the hard realizations. Though you are supposed to be looking in a mirror when you say them."

A sharp inhale of breath was Neil's only warning before his arm was grabbed by Kevin.

Neil shook Kevin off. Kevin could be a coward all he wanted, but Neil had never taken it lying down and he wouldn't start now.

"You think you're hot shit now Nate? You're still worthless. You're still pathetic—"

"I think you're projecting a bit big brother. You might want to look in a mirror."

Riko takes a step forward, but he immediately takes a step back when a certain blonde stands between Neil and Riko.

"Don't touch my things Riko," Andrew says, "I don't share."

"He's not yours," Riko snarls, "He's mine."

"Actually," Wymack throws out, and Riko snaps to attention. Likely having forgotten Wymack was there, "I have a contract with him. For the next five years, he's mine."

Riko clenches his teeth, unable to say anything more in front of coach Wymack.

Neil ignores Riko's glare, and brushes past Riko. Their shoulders bump so hard that Riko stumbles. It had definitely been on purpose.

Neil made into the locker rooms, and he barely had time to make it inside, before Kevin was on him.

"You need to stop antagonizing him!" Kevin said, "You're going to bring him down on all of us. Don't you remember what happened at Evermore!? Do you remember what happened last time you insulted Riko on TV? You just need to duck your head and—"

"Stay quiet?" Neil snapped back, "Well I'm fucking sorry Kevin, but I won't do that."

"You don't know what he might do—"

"I think I know perfectly," Neil snarls back, "I certainly know better than you. You want to hide behind Andrew, then fine. But don't you force me into the shadows because your fucking scared. Because I won't bend for him. He might be able to force my body into submission. But my attitude is mine. It always has been. He won't break me of that."

Neil grabs his clothes, and storms off to the showers.

Chapter 39

Neil was awoken by a pounding on the door. Neil jumped out of bed so fast that he fell and smashed his face into the floor. His legs were tangled up in the sheets. Neil panicked when a figure moved in the room.

"No, no, no—"

The lights turned on and Neil blinked. Andrew stood at the light switch. His face was pointed at Neil.

Neil felt something run down his lips, and he brought a hand up and brushed his thumb under his nose. It was bleeding.

"I'm fine," Neil said, when Andrew took a step forward. "I just need some tissues."

Andrew nodded and grabbed a box from the bathroom, before throwing it to Neil and heading to the door.

Renee stood there, tired but alert. Neil found himself stiffening at the expression on her face.

"The cars we're trashed," Renee says calmly.

Neil feels his stomach tighten. He almost runs out the door without even his shoes, but Andrew grabs his collar.

Andrew forces Neil to put on shoes and a jacket before they walk hurriedly to the elevator.

The cars were worse than trashed. Neil was pretty sure they were totaled. Neil swallowed when he saw the word "whore" spelled out on Matt's truck in big angry letters.

Allison's car was completely smashed up, all the windows were smashed in, and the word "unlovable" was spelled out on it.

Jean's car had all the tires slashed. The headlights were busted, the windows also smashed in.

Neil couldn't see Andrew's car, but he watched as Andrew and his group went to the back of the lot to inspect it. Neil didn't follow. Red shame filled his cheeks as he stared at the cars.

"Fuck!" Matt shouted looking at his vehicle.

Neil flinched back from his loud yell. Neil had never heard Matt so angry before.

"I can't believe we are doing this shit again," Dan muttered.

Neil swallowed as Allison kicked the tire of her car. Seth had an angry clench to his jaw.

Neil had known that Riko would retaliate. But he hadn't thought it would be against the team. So far Neil had been able to stand in their way, he'd been able to protect them.

"I'm sorry," Neil said shakily.

Kevin was still standing with Jean. There was an angry clench to his jaw. Jean had his phone out, likely calling Coach.

"You're not," Allison said.

"I—"

"You will not be sorry for this!" Allison said angrily, "If Riko wants to be a child then let him. But you won't be sorry for this Neil! Not after everything he's done to you."

The foxes all nodded in agreement. But Kevin's fists were clenched down by his sides. And Neil knew there was a tidal wave of anger incoming. It was no secret that Jean and Kevin were no longer as close to Neil as they were in the nest. The three Ravens often separated. And Kevin had tried before to silence Neil's attitude, both in the nest, and with the foxes.

"Why don't you ever listen to me?" Kevin's voice shook with rage.

Neil stayed quiet. Kevin had been right this time, Neil had pushed Riko too far.

"You did this back in the nest too!" Kevin's voice got louder, "You'd fucking ignore everything I told you. I told you that if you ducked your head— But you never did! I told you to not press it, but yet you still did! Then you got us out! You got out! But you had to open your mouth all over again! You're the one who brought them down on Seth. You're the one who brought them down on Andrew. You're the one who caused all of this! If you were going to get your ass beat and talk back, then you should have stayed in the nest where it wouldn't have hurt anyone else!"

Neil knew the words were said out of anger. Kevin lashed out to hurt when he got pissed and scared. But it didn't matter, the words struck.

Jean's mouth fell open, and the phone slipped from his grasp. His eyes were horrified.

Neil didn't respond, the words just thrown into his face were harsh enough to leave him speechless.

"Finally shut you up—"

Kevin was cut off by a harsh slap against his face. It did nothing to calm Kevin's anger, and instead Kevin glared at Allison.

It was the choked sound exiting Neil's throat that shattered through Kevin's rage.

Neil saw the moment that Kevin regretted his words. Neil saw the moment that Kevin's mind clicked back into full clarity, but it didn't matter. The damage had been done.

Neil had been trying to ignore the rift between him and Kevin. Things hadn't quite been the same since Neil had started with the foxes.

"I'm going for a run," Neil managed

"Neil!"

Neil tore away from the foxes at a speed he knew none of them would be able to keep up with. He tore around a corner, and he heard shouting and panicked voices from where the foxes were.

"HE FUCKING DESERVED WORSE ANDREW!!"

"ANDREW LET HER GO NOW!!"

The voices faded as Neil got further and further away.

Neil stopped in the middle of the campus. All the school buildings were empty, devoid of life. And Neil let himself fall hard to his knees in the middle of the main square. The concrete did

nothing to help break his fall.

"You should have just stayed in the nest."

A choked sob exits Neil's lips.

Undeserving.

You don't deserve them.

Why would you ever think that you did.

Pathetic, worthless, waste of fucking—

A fluttering noise yanks Neil out of his own mind, and back into the present.

Neil glances up, and notices papers hanging from a tree. Neil stumbles to his feet and heads over to it.

He scans the paper, and his heart plummets.

"What was inside?"

He glances around, and notices the papers were everywhere.

"Something that shouldn't exist."

Covering windows, doors, walls, hanging in the trees.

"Riko mentioned it was because you kept taking his things, and that it was a rundown on one's condition. I'm assuming he means Jean, Kevin, and I. So which one of us is in the binder?"

Each paper had awful photographs, all of which had Neil's stomach clenching.

"It's you, it's pictures. And Riko included 'care instructions'."

Each image was different.

"Can you at least tell me how bad they were?"

Each image was—

"Awful."

Nathaniel Wesninski Care Instructions

1) If he's fighting, handcuff him. It will be entertaining when he tears open his wrists trying to get free.

"Nathaniel," Riko said with a grin, " You know fighting them only hurts you. Just be a good boy for me."

2) Turn him on to make him feel ashamed.

"You like it Nathaniel, don't lie."

3) *He has to earn dessert privileges .*

"Neil, you ate the cake," Riko said, forcing Neil to his knees, "You know what that means."

4) *Call him worthless. Degrade him. Make him hate himself.*

"Such a pathetic little whore."

5) *If he's mouthy, gag him.*

"You're so silent when your mouth is full."

6) *He can take more than one dick at once.*

"Stop screaming, this is all that you're good for."

7) *Take pictures for later.*

"Get his good side... Oh wait—"

8) *If he wakes you up, you get automatic rights.*

"I do love my morning wake up call."

9) Remind him of his place.

"Kneel Nathaniel."

10) Make him say please.

"Please stop. Please stop. Please Stop."

Neil stared at the words on the page and his hands shook. He almost managed to calm down, but then he flipped over the paper and choked.

He couldn't have been more than thirteen in the photo. The amount of blood and other bodily excrements made Neil's stomach twist, and he could taste that disgusting bitter flavor on his tongue again.

Neil stumbled to his feet, backing away from the picture that had been in his hands moments before. Neil ran.

Neil was moving quickly, but it was like his entire mind was underwater. He stumbled into a store at some point. He went to the razors and picked up razor blades, stumbling the whole way. Neil hurriedly paid for them, glad he kept his wallet in the jacket Andrew had forced him into.

Neil ran when he left the store. Stumbling his way back to the court. Neil skidded to a stop when he saw the papers littering the outside gate and walls of the court. Neil stumbled back away, swallowing hard.

His mind swam.

Disgusting

Worthless

Dirty

Used

Neil choked on his panic, and ran around to the roof access ladder. He climbed up the rungs as fast as he could. He found himself breathing hard on his hands and knees bent over and looking at the drop. He could see the parking lot below.

It would be so simple.

It would be so easy.

Just to fall.

Neil wanted to die so badly. Kevin's words, the pictures, the instructions. Neil rested his forehead against the ledge, breathing hard.

He couldn't do this.

He wasn't strong enough.

He wanted it to be—

Neil's brain ground to a halt when he heard his ring tone go off.

Neil didn't remember grabbing his phone on the way out of the room, so the only explanation is that Andrew had slipped it into his jacket when shrugging it onto Neil.

Neil answered without checking the name.

"Neil," Betsy's voice came through the speaker, "The foxes are all worried about you. Are you alright?"

Neil let a hysterical laugh exit his lips.

"I will be," Neil said laughing as tears ran down his face, "I'm going to be off suicide watch soon! Can't watch me if I'm dead."

Neil hears Betsy let out a slow exhale of breath.

"Neil, can you tell me where you are?" Betsy asked. Neil could hear the strain in Betsy's voice.

Neil stood up, stumbling slightly. He staggered and almost fell straight off the ledge.

"Thank you for everything Betsy," Neil said, pressing a hand to his head.

He felt like a tidal wave of emotions was rising inside of him, and a loud choked sob exited his lips as he laughed again. Neil hung up his phone and turned off the ringer.

His mind swam. He was so tired of fighting. He was so tired of getting better, only to be kicked down again. Neil was tired of begging and pleading for life to get better, only to have it smack him upside the head on the next turn.

Neil's mind swam with words from the Ravens.

Worthless

Disgusting

Unlovable

Dirty

Used

Broken

Whore

Ugly

Neil sobbed again. Because he wanted things to be different. He wanted the foxes. He wanted his brothers. He wanted Andrew.

But Neil was so tired.

Neil found himself sitting again, back away from the edge. He had his knees pulled up to his chest. He must have stayed there a while, because he came back to himself when he heard voices down below.

"Have you found him yet!?" Dan's voice asked.

"No!" Allison sounded panicked and out of breath. "Seth and Matt have checked every building. I know the monster and his group are looking downtown—"

Neil heard a car squealing into the parking lot. He peaked over the edge to see Andrew and Jean getting out of Coach Wymack's truck.

"He's not downtown," Jean said. There was an edge to Jean's voice. A cold, frightened edge.

"Where's Kevin?" Wymack asked.

"Staying far the fuck away from me," Andrew responded.

Neil allowed himself to lay back onto the roof. Pain settled in his chest, and he curled around himself.

"He's in the dorms," Jean responded, "He's a mess at the moment."

"Jesus," Wymack muttered.

"Betsy called me," Andrew says, "Neil gave her a goodbye on the phone."

To anyone else those words would sound uncaring, and detached. But Neil could hear the edge.

Neil tuned out the rest of what they were going to say. He couldn't hesitate if he was going to do this. He had to do it then.

Neil fumbled a bit with the packaging to the razor blades. But he got it open and pressed a fresh one to his arm.

No one would save him this time.

Worthless.

No one would care.

Disgusting

No one would—

"You matter too. And we'll be owing you for a long time for all the shit we pulled at the start of this year."

No one could possibly—

"Dude you are my new religion."

Neil was tired—

"What happened after I left?"

"Riko called you a few choice words. None of them took it too kindly."

He was disgusting—

"You did the best you could in helping your family. And you won't catch any of us thinking bad about you because of it."

He was lost—

"Neil, come on back to us alright. You're alright hun. We have you."

He was broken—

"We have you. I promise you that we have you. And we aren't letting go."

He was a—

Yes or no?

Neil's entire frame shook as he sobbed. He felt something well up inside of himself. Something, that not long ago, had just been a simple ember.

Neil's hand shook as he dialed Andrew.

"I'm on top of the court," Neil said simply.

Neil hung up the phone after that. It was taking everything he had not to fall off the edge. At some point he'd gotten up and walked back over to it.

He was still standing at the edge when Andrew's footsteps made it to the roof.

Andrew's footsteps froze when Andrew saw Neil.

"I don't know what's happening to me," Neil admits out loud, "I've never hesitated to kill myself before."

Andrew said nothing.

"Hell, I even bought razor blades," Neil said quietly. "I was so ready to die. I still am. Did you see the photos all over campus?"

Andrew was silent.

"But even with all that, there's a part of myself that tells me that I want to wake up tomorrow."

Neil sees Andrew take a step forward.

Neil turns and puts out his hand for an offering. And Andrew takes Neil's hand.

Andrew grasps tightly to Neil's arm, and then turns it over to look at Neil's forearm.

Unmarred. Uncut.

Andrew's hand tightens on Neil's wrist at that sight.

"Some part of me knows that tomorrow I want to wake up and see the foxes again."

Neil knew he couldn't fall back, not with the grip Andrew had on his arm, but his legs still beg to turn around and leap.

"But I'm on a ledge that I can't fight right now. And I don't know what happened to me, but for some reason I want to fight it."

Neil's hands shake, and he can hear the broken quality of his own voice.

"I can't fight it today. I can't do this right now."

Andrew takes a step forward, but readjusted his grip on Neil's arm so that Neil couldn't use it to fall off.

"I need to lean on you today. I need you to carry me through until I get to tomorrow. I need you to get me through to today even if that means pinning me to keep me from jumping off a roof. Don't let me die."

Andrew is staring at Neil, an unwavering expression of acceptance on his face.

"Be my anchor," Neil said shakily. "Yes or no?"

Andrew didn't respond, but he yanked so that Neil stumbled straight into Andrew's chest. An arm wrapped around his upper back, holding him up.

"Yes Junkie," Andrew's words vibrated in his chest, "You fight to get there. I'll ensure you don't stop fighting."

Steady arms held Neil's pieces together. Strong arms carried Neil through the dark abyss of his mind.

"Promise not to let me die?"

"I made that promise a long time ago."

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sun was coming up by the time Andrew got Neil off the roof and safely onto the ground. Andrew practically carried him down when Neil hesitated at the ladder, his eyes finding the ground.

He hadn't even realized he had been tipping forward until Andrew grabbed his collar and yanked Neil back.

After that they tried with Andrew going down first, but Neil phased out again. Tilting back to fall. Andrew grabbed him again, and that time hadn't let go. Andrew carried Neil to the ground. And then Andrew continued to carry him until they were in front of the court. He put Neil down, but kept a hold of Neil's collar.

Once they were at the bottom, Andrew deposited Neil onto the ground.

"Call Bee," Andrew says. "She called me in a panic earlier. I think you made her cry."

Guilt fills Neil's chest, and he pats his pockets for his phone.

"I think I left my phone on the roof," Neil says.

Andrew doesn't respond, but instead pulls his own phone out. He flipped it open and pressed a button, before handing it to Neil.

Betsy answered quickly, "Andrew I—"

"It's me Bee," Neil says, cutting off Betsy's frantic words. He feels tired, and puts the phone on speaker so that Andrew could help him with the conversation. A car comes along at a fast pace, and Neil wonders what death by car would feel like.

Andrew's arms link around Neil's chest, and yank him back into a sitting position. Neil hadn't realized that he'd stood. Neil's hands shake. Andrew practically pulls Neil into his lap. Neil's back was pressed into Andrew's chest. Andrew's chin was on his shoulder.

Neil trusted Andrew to hold him up while he waged his war. And when Andrew's arms tightened at the sight of another car, Neil let Andrew hold him.

"Neil!" Betsy said, her voice was thick. And Neil's heart clenched, "Did Andrew find you?"

Neil didn't have the energy to respond, another car passed and Neil gripped Andrew's wrist tightly to stop the instinctive jerk towards it.

"He called me," Andrew said, "He told me where he was."

There was silence from the phone. And Neil felt himself growing more and more limp in Andrew's hold.

Andrew readjusted Neil so that Neil was laying more than sitting.

"How are you Neil?" Betsy asked.

Neil opened his mouth to speak, but halted when only a choked sob exited his lips.

His chest felt so empty. So many thoughts flying through his head about dying. So many thoughts about no one giving a damn if he did.

Another car passed and Andrew's grip on Neil tightened.

"I need to get him inside," Andrew said, "But my car was trashed this morning. I hope you don't mind picking us up."

Neil tuned out the rest of the conversation. Instead he floated somewhere between his body and outside of it. He could see Andrew edge inside his mind. One that he knew he would fall off of.

He came back when he was being shoved onto the floor of the front seat between Andrew's legs. But he was still floating, still despondent.

"That isn't very safe Andrew."

"Trust me Bee, you don't want me to let go of him right now."

"He should be getting checked into a hospital right now, his mental state is too bad right now."

Neil felt the car move.

"Riko could just send Proust—"

Neil flinched full body at Proust's name. Andrew grabbed the back of Neil's collar when Neil tried to jump out of Betsy's car.

"I have him Bee, he asked me to get him through to tomorrow. I'll keep him safe."

Neil settled slowly and relaxed. His head tilted forward on it's own, and Andrew moved him so that Neil was leaning against Andrew's knee.

"Are you okay with being that close to him? If not I'm sure we can figure something else out."

"Even my fucked up brain can distinguish that any touch from him isn't a threat right now. The only threat he poses is to himself. Besides, it's Neil."

"You sound like you trust him a lot."

"He called me instead of dying today. I'd say he's earned it."

Neil phased out again. The edge was closer. He came back to Andrew's hand on the back of his neck.

"We're going inside Neil," Andrew said, "Right now, come on."

Neil glanced at his legs, willing them to move. To do what they were supposed to do. But they stayed where they were.

Neil's head fell back, and silent tears tracked down his face.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asks, "Carrying you."

Neil tried to speak. But his voice was gone. He let his eyes look at Andrew.

"Nod or shake your head."

Neil nodded. He managed to nod.

"Do you want to talk to the foxes when we get inside?"

Neil shook his head.

Andrew picks Neil up, slinging Neil's arms around his neck, but Neil's arms fell limp at his sides.

"Wesninski you need to hold on so that you don't fall."

Neil buries his face in Andrew's neck, and wraps his arms around Andrew's shoulders.

Andrew carried him much like he had at Easthaven. Neil sagged and Andrew's grip on him tightened in response.

"Do you have food in your dorm?"

"Not anything I'll be able to get him to eat today."

"What do you think you'd be able to get him to eat?"

"Fruit, he likes strawberries the most."

"I'll pick up some stuff from the store, keep him drinking water."

Neil phased back out. The edge hurtled closer. He could feel the movements of Andrew's jaw, but he didn't comprehend anything leaving the blonde's mouth.

Neil phased back in when he heard the foxes.

"Oh thank god!"

"Where was he?"

"On top of the court— Do not touch him."

"The pictures are everywhere—"

Neil tensed.

"—But the Vixens are all out taking them down. Nothing has been put online. They have the most trafficked places cleared. They came across a couple assholes—"

"Talk about it later."

"But—"

"Not now."

A hand lays steady on Neil's neck, and Neil's breathing slows. He hadn't been aware of it picking up.

"Renee come with me."

"Of course."

Neil phases out. The edge was even closer.

"Take my armbands."

"Are you sure?"

"There's a box in my closet with his knives too, take that as well."

"... Alright... Do you need anything else?"

"If they need to speak with him or I they send you today. No one other than you and Betsy comes in here."

"I can do that."

Neil phased out. He could see over the side now. He could already feel the crunch of his bones when he fell.

He phased back in to knocking.

"I brought fruits. How is he?"

"He hasn't said a word since his phone call with you."

"Is he responsive?"

"He's in and out."

Betsy appears in front of Neil.

"Hey Neil, do you think you can eat something?"

Neil doesn't respond. He can't. He feels as if his skin has literally been torn off. He felt exposed and raw. He didn't have the energy to respond. He didn't even have the energy to live.

Neil phased back out. He was balancing. He was grabbing hold of the edge and trying to to get shoved over.

"Renee, is something wrong?"

"No. Andrew the Vixens took down all the photos. I think they got to it before the majority of campus saw it. The fact that most people leave campus on the weekend probably helped."

"Burn them."

"Bonfire later then?"

"When he's better."

Neil didn't understand why they cared. What was so great about him? Why were they sticking by him? He didn't deserve this.

Neil phased back out. He was slipping. He was going to fall. He couldn't catch himself.

"He covered me with a sheet after Drake."

"Is there a reason that's on your mind?"

"He covered me, but I couldn't cover him."

Neil phased out. He phased out. He phased out. And he fell. He fell. He fell.

Neil was screaming. He was crying. He was begging. Flashes of a camera. Blood.

"Neil—"

Bite marks. Bruises. Pain.

"Andrew, he's going to hurt himself."

Pinned to the ground. Forced. Living in a body that no longer belonged to him.

"Neil—"

He was so tired of fighting. Tired of doing this shit over and over again.

"Listen to my voice Neil—"

He was already dead. He died a long time ago. If he died now it wouldn't even—

"Abram, come back."

Neil's mind froze. Strong arms gripped him tightly. His arms were crossed over his chest, another person's arms held them in place.

"I'm falling," Neil said shakily. His voice shook. His body shook. "I can't catch myself."

"I've already caught you," Andrew says

Neil remembers the upperclassmen holding tight to him during his panic attack after the fall banquet, and Neil breaks.

"Don't let me go back. Don't let me go."

"We've got you Neil," Betsy says. "Stay with us alright."

It was an hour before Neil finally called down, and for the first time all day he breathed. His chest began to uncool.

Betsy and Andrew haul Neil to the bathroom when he's finally coherent. Neil shuts the curtain of the shower, and Andrew sits on the toilet. When he'd dressed and brushed his teeth and hair, Neil followed Andrew out to the kitchen.

Neil is sat down in front of some water and fruit.

Betsy and Andrew watch Neil as he eats. Neil has to force every motion, but he slowly begins to feel better. Slowly his eyes clear up, and the fog that had been surrounding him all day lifts.

Betsy left at some point with her last parting words being, "I'm proud of you Neil."

And the last barrier that had settled around him broke.

He came up and the world looked different. It looked survivable.

"Can we smoke?" Neil asked a while later.

The sky had darkened considerably, and Andrew glanced at Neil. His hazel eyes silently checked Neil over. He must have found everything to be in order, because he guided Neil to the window. Together they lit up.

The moon was out, and Neil smiled at how bright it was. Things around him were absolutely gorgeous.

"I was right," Neil said, and Andrew's glance turned to him, "Right now... I'm happy I'm here."

Andrew doesn't respond at first, but there is the smallest quirk to his lips.

"Life would have gotten a lot less interesting if you would have died today." Andrew says.

The moonlight glints off of Andrew's hair. Andrew's lips look amazing smoking his cigarette. Andrew's eyes are focused and sure.

Andrew had always asked yes or no.

Andrew was the only one who ever stood in the fire with Neil.

Andrew understood Neil.

Andrew was a steady constant.

And Neil—

"Not right now," Neil started out with, "Because I'm not in the right mental state. But I really want you to kiss me."

Neil didn't wait for a response, instead he got up and went over to the TV. Turning it on, and falling asleep.

Neil was awoken by a knocking on the door. Andrew was the one who opened it.

"Hi— um," Neil was surprised to hear Katelyn's voice. "We were wondering if Neil wanted to be there when we burned the pictures. We got hot dogs and s'mores, we are going to have some music and stuff."

Andrew doesn't respond, but he looks over at Neil with a raised eyebrow.

Neil doesn't bother with a full response, instead he grabs his jacket, and Andrew's jacket. And they follow Katelyn to the Bonfire. When they get down to it, Neil turns to Katelyn. And

luckily Andrew decides to leave Neil to whatever he needs to do and join the foxes around an already burning fire.

"Thank you," Neil says to Katelyn, "I really appreciate it."

"I owed you one," Katelyn responded, "I gave Aaron an ultimatum. He wasn't happy about it, but I told him that this whole thing, being in fear of being seen, wasn't cutting it anymore. Thanks for the advice by the way."

"It wasn't a problem," Neil responded. "He'll choose you by the way. He just needs time to realize it."

Katelyn nods, and sends Neil a kind thank you. And then she goes to join the other Vixens.

Neil goes to join Andrew, who was holding a sticky concoction of Marshmallow and chocolate, all encased inside Graham Crackers.

Neil stares at it for a moment.

"What the fuck is that?" Neil asked.

"It's a S'more you uneducated child," Nicky cuts in.

Neil stares at it and winces at how disgustingly sticky it looks.

Nicky groans, "Here," Nicky thrusts a hot dog into Neil's hand, "Just eat your hot dog and stop judging our amazing delicacies."

Neil takes his hot dog and eats it. Then he turns back to the people around the fire.

The ones who stuck beside Neil all day. Who searched for him when he couldn't search for himself. The people who pulled him up time and time again.

"Hey Nicky!" Neil calls out, "Can I try one of those?"

Andrew stills when he sees Neil is gesturing to the plate of S'mores.

Nicky's eyes brighten and he hands one to Neil.

Neil stares at it a moment, before taking a giant bite.

Neil grimaced.

"Oh God it's so fucking sweet!" Neil yells, "I can feel my fucking teeth rotting."

Andrew's eyes were slightly widened, his mouth had paused around his S'more.

Neil had said it tasted sweet, not bitter like all the other times.

Neil still didn't like it.

"God I think I have like forty seven cavities now." Neil complains. "And my hands feel like I washed them in a tub of glue."

Neil sticks and unsticks his fingers together. And then his eyes catch Andrew, who was watching him while continuing to munch his S'more. Andrew's eyes were illuminated by the fire, and the foxes had stepped off to the other side and were too busy dancing to look over at Neil and Andrew.

"Yes or no?" Neil asked, stepping closer to Andrew.

Andrew pauses again, and yanks his gaze to Neil.

"Yes."

Neil grins, and wipes his sticky hands on Andrew's face.

"Thank you," Neil says, "I hate having sticky hands."

Andrew's jaw is clenched and he's glaring at Neil.

Neil grins, and Andrew responds by grabbing Ketchup off the table, and dumping it into Neil's hair.

Neil's face turned into that of shock, and Ketchup dripped down Neil's face. Neil's face transforms into a grin and he scoops Ketchup out of his hair... and slaps it onto Andrew's face.

There's a glint in Andrew's eyes. Nothing dangerous. Maybe amusement. Whatever it was, it made Neil laugh.

"Oh my God!" Nicky shouted, "Is that blood?"

"It's Ketchup!" Neil says back.

The others say other stuff, but Neil is watching Andrew with a grin. Andrew glares.

"HEY LET GO OF ME!"

Neil hears Katelyn yell, and both Andrew and Neil turned at those words.

Neil didn't recognize the male who held Katelyn's arm in a death grip. But he recognized the look in his eye.

Neil moved before Andrew did.

"Little bitch," The tall guy said, "You take my pictures this morning and punch me. You should repay me for—"

Neil shoves the guy hard. The guy stumbles and falls on his ass. He glares at Neil, but the glare transforms into a smirk.

"Oh hey!" The guy says standing, "I know you! You're the pretty boy from the pictures. Gonna Kneel for me baby boy?"

"From here on out, it matters. If you say no, it means no."

Neil laughs, "Not a chance. You don't impress me with your attitude, I doubt you'd interest me with your size. Run along now."

"You don't get to say no you little whore," The man takes a step forward.

Neil holds his ground.

"Good thing you aren't a whore."

"I can say no if I damn well please," Neil said. "I said no. No means no. So you know that or do I need to get your lame ass a dictionary."

The man reaches for Neil grabbing Neil by the throat.

"I said kneel," he snarls.

"If your boundaries are 'it's a no until it's a yes', then people must follow those Neil. It is your body, you get to decide who sees it and touches it."

"And I said no," Neil growls back.

Neil brings his knee up between the guy's legs. The grip on his throat is instantly released.

"Listen up," Neil says, rubbing his throat, "I'm only going to say this one time."

Neil kicks the guy across the face, and sends the man sprawling to the side.

"Touch me without my consent and I'll cut off your goddamn hands. Tell me to Kneel and I'll shatter your fucking kneecaps. Try to bend me over and fuck me and I'll cut your dick off and shove it down your goddamn throat."

The man finally stands up again, and Neil swings punching him across the face.

"I said no," Neil said, placing a foot on the guys chest and pressing down. The guy stares at Neil terrified. "Maybe you're hard of hearing... but I damn well meant it. Are we clear you limp dickd asshole."

"Clear– we're clear!" the guy coughed and sputtered as blood trickled down his face.

Neil turns around while shaking out his hand, to see Andrew standing not far behind. Andrew had let Neil handle it. Had trusted Neil to handle it. The rest of the foxes were watching in shock. Though Matt looked proud.

"Betsy told me healing was done in Baby steps," Neil said. "I think I took a few today."

"Wesninski," Andrew says, "Those weren't baby steps. That was one giant fucking leap."

Neil walks with Andrew back to the tower, the other foxes don't say anything about it.

"On a scale of one to ten, how much of your hard on is from watching me punch that guy?" Neil asks.

Neil is shoved into the bushes.

Chapter End Notes

Andrew's POV (THE FIRE)

Neil looked at his fingers, and a flash of amusement sparked in Andrew's chest as he watched Neil figure out how sticky a S'more was.

Neil who couldn't eat S'mores or any dessert without puking, just ate one and was now roasting the flavor.

Only Neil could make Andrew feel this way. Only Neil could make Andrew feel anything at all. Andrew hated him for it.

He also hated how Neil's Auburn hair lit up in the light of the flames. Hated how the fire accentuated every single one of Neil's curves and muscles. He hated how Neil's blue eyes were more stunning when lit up with light.

He had no right to make Andrew feel these things.

"Yes or no?" Neil asked with a smile. His whole face lit up by the flames of the fire.

Neil had stepped closer, and if he leaned over and down their lips would touch. It made Andrew's heartbeat quicken.

Andrew saw that no one was looking. They could trade a quick kiss and not be discovered by the foxes.

"Yes." Andrew says. Managing to keep his voice level.

Andrew knew he made a mistake when Neil grinned. And then he felt sticky fingers wipe themselves on his face.

That mother fucker.

Andrew hated him. Andrew hated him so much.

Chapter 41

Sunday morning Neil is pretty sure he and Andrew were finally going to kiss.

Neil had popped into the window with Andrew. Had smoked a cigarette with Andrew. Had gotten distracted looking at Andrew. And had even managed to annoy Andrew with all that staring.

It was starting off to be a pretty good day.

"Stop staring," Andrew says before taking another drag of his cigarette.

"If I can't look at your unfairly attractive face, you can't look at my ass," Neil says with a grin.

Andrew glances over at Neil with a bored expression, but he must have figured that to be fair because Andrew stops complaining about Neil's staring.

"Would you kiss me?" Neil asked.

Neil had planned out his boundaries in his head before falling asleep the night prior. He was a bit nervous for the moment he closed his eyes, not knowing where the hands were.

He'd thought about keeping his eyes open during the kiss, but he read somewhere that only psychopaths do that. Neil came up with the idea that Andrew could keep his hands in Neil's hair, that way Neil knew by feeling where the hands were at all times.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked, flicking his cigarette out the window and turning to face Neil more properly.

Neil grins, "Yes, but keep your hands in my hair. If they leave my hair I'll stop."

Andrew doesn't question it, his fingers reach up to Neil's hair. He gives one more glance to Neil before threading his fingers through it. Neil meanwhile puts his hands behind his back.

Neil feels himself get pulled in close, Andrew's breath is warm on his lips. Neil hadn't closed his eyes yet, so Andrew's hazel ones were directly on Neil's. Closer up, the golden specs in Andrew's irises were even more prominent and breathtaking.

Neil startles hard at a knock on the door.

"Stop," Neil says. Too much panic flushed through him to continue after the loud knocks.

Andrew's hands are out of his hair instantly, and Neil takes a few steadying breaths.

There's another knock at the door, and Neil groans.

"I'm going to maim Kevin," Neil says, leaning his head against the window sill.

Andrew glances at Neil. "How do you know that it's Kevin's fault?"

"My mathematical equation of Kevin of course," Neil says with an annoyed face.

"It might not be Kevin," Andrew points out.

"Want to bet?" Neil grins. He pulls himself out of the window.

Andrew glances at Neil, "What are the terms?"

"If the reasons for this knock are because of Kevin," Neil said, " You go for a run with me for the next week. If they aren't then you get to dress me up for Eden's from now on. Anything on the table as long as it's black and my torso and arms are covered."

Andrew stares at Neil, then gives Neil's ass a long unabashed stare.

Neil turns away from Andrew, very much on purpose, and maybe sways his hips a bit more than normal.

"Deal Junkie," Neil hears, and Neil grins wide.

Another louder knock sounds, and Neil sighs. Striding to open the door. Definitely still swinging his hips on purpose.

Neil glances over at Andrew, who is glaring at Neil and clenching his jaw.

Neil opens the door.

"Kevin is annoying me so I am hanging out with you guys today," Jean says irritably.

Jean strides into the room and plops down into a beanbag whilst staring at the ceiling. But Neil turns to Andrew. Neil grins.

"I hope you have good running shoes Andrew," Neil says, " You're doing cardio with me this week."

Andrew glares at Neil and lights another cigarette.

"What did Kevin do this time?" Neil asks.

"I'm already pissed at him for yesterday morning," Jean says, "And I am more pissed because instead of dealing with his emotions like a normal human being. He has to drink and run everyone into the ground."

"Sounds like him," Neil says, "He needs therapy."

"All that matters to him is Exy and alcohol," Jean says irritated, "It's getting old. I have a test at 7 am tomorrow. I don't have time to break myself at a Sunday practice."

"Did you at least bring your books so that you can study here?" Neil asked.

"Kevin has hidden my books until I go play at least an hour of Exy! His way of coping can be running himself into the ground, but it won't be mine." Jean says angrily.

Jean breathes for a few moments, then his gaze settles on Neil and it softens.

"And you?" Jean inquires, "How are you?"

Neil almost said, *cockblocked*, but he refrained.

Neil shrugged, "A good number of people on campus have now seen me bloody and naked, so I mean as good as I can be with that in my head. I guess it's good the Vixens cleaned house before the media got a hold of anything."

"Katelyn punched a few guys who wouldn't give the pictures up," Jean said, " Very entertaining."

"Was that why that one guy was harassing her?"

"Yes," Jean replied.

"I should have punched him harder," Neil responds glumly.

"I know where his dorm is," Andrew said, " We can go punch him right now."

Neil brightens, "Let's go then! What are we waiting for!?"

"I believe Coach will kill both of you if you punch a student on campus without provocation." Jean said, stopping both Andrew and Neil.

"He can try," Andrew says, but he sits back down, and Neil follows suit.

"I can't believe Riko distributed those," Jean says in disbelief, "Those were very incriminating towards him."

"Even if they were incriminating," Neil responds, " If I'm the reason an investigation is opened on the Ravens, possibly leading to an investigation into the Moriyama's, I would be dead before it hit morning news. Besides I don't think it was Riko."

"Of course it was—"

Neil shakes his head. He'd been thinking about it all night.

"Riko isn't that stupid," Neil responds, "He may act like a spoiled brat, but he is a calculating one. He wouldn't have distributed the photos. Not like that. It's possible that another Raven spearheaded it but—"

"But what?" Jean asks.

"I don't think any of them would be brave enough to undercut Riko like that." Neil responds, "Thomas is pretty stupid though, so it's still possible."

"But you have another theory," Andrew supplies.

Neil nods. "He has pictures of me from ages ago. I think— I could be wrong but— I think Riko might have been selling them. Or maybe it was just the Ravens in general selling them. Probably to Raven fans and such too."

You could hear a pin drop with the silence. It had been a thought Neil had been trying not to entertain. But it fit, and more importantly it fit Riko's character.

"It would explain the half thought through idea of placing Incriminating child pornography all over campus," Jean said.

"I'm worried someone called the cops anyways," Neil muttered, "If the higher ups in the college heard about it—"

"Wymack handled it," Andrew said, "In other words, he didn't tell anyone shit. And the Vixens cleared it away before anyone but a handful of asshole students saw it."

"What if the students post it?" Neil asked quietly.

"I'm pretty sure the students are fearing for their lives after what you pulled with that one guy last night," Jean responded. "That's actually been bigger news than the pictures. The fact that a tiny 5'3" Exy player, took out the school's boxing champion."

"Our boxing team must suck," Neil deadpanned as he thought about how easy it had been to drop the fucker.

"It does," Jean conceded.

They fell into relative silence. At some point Kevin began drunkenly singing in his dorm, loud enough that likely the whole building could hear it.

"He actually sounds better drunk," Neil mutters surprised.

"AND AYYYYYYYYYEE WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOOOOOOOU!" Kevin's discordant singing actually garnered a reaction out of Andrew, who proceeded to walk over to the shared wall and pound on it several times.

The pounding didn't get a response, and Kevin's singing only got louder.

Neil winced.

"Get him to stop," Andrew pointed at Neil.

"No," Neil said simply, "No I think you've got this."

Andrew glares, "He's your brother!"

"And now he's your overly grown child," Neil responded, "You adopted him when you made your deal with him."

"You were his protector far before I was Wesninski," Andrew replies with his jaw clenched.

"I'm not anymore," Neil responds, "I'm officially relinquishing Jean and Kevin over to you."

Those words were said in the middle of a very non-serious moment, but yet they were an incredible step forward. Even if it made Neil queasy to say it.

Jean's face snapped up, "What do you mean?" Jean asked quietly. His face held some level of insecurity.

"I trust Andrew with you guys," Neil said shrugging, "And I need to fight for myself now. You two are still my brothers... but it's time for me to take my steps forward. I can't do that while protecting you."

Neil sees Jean's face and suddenly feels guilty for what he'd said.

"Sorry I—"

Jean catches Neil off guard by pulling Neil into a hug.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for you to say that," Jean says.

The hug is bone crushing.

"Sometimes at night I think I can still hear your screams," Jean is crying. And Neil didn't know what to do. "I have nightmares where you're begging for me to save you, and I can't

move because I'm so afraid of what happens if I protect you."

Neil can see Andrew watching with slight interest.

"Everytime I see you get between us and danger I just keep begging that you'll stand aside for once. I've wanted to see the day you put yourself first for once."

Neil remembers the times that Jean begged him to stop. Neil remembers how he never listened. Remembers how he pushed away all offers of help because it would mean Jean and Kevin getting hurt.

"I'm looking out for me now," Neil says, "I won't stand aside and watch you get hurt of course. But no more Martyr shit from me. I promise."

"Thank you," Jean says.

Kevin's singing ramped up again. And this time it was full out wailing.

"Okay Daddy Andrew," Neil said, "Go get your kid to shut the fuck up."

Andrew glared, "Shut the fuck up Wesninski."

Wymack called them not long after Andrew got Kevin to stop singing. Neil swears he saw duct tape, but he could be wrong.

Wymack told the foxes to stay at the dorms, because the court had been vandalized. Luckily no photos made a reappearance, but still the defacement was obviously aimed at Neil.

The words that littered Neil's torso under the plethora of new names that were placed there during Christmas, had been spray painted across the outside of the court in red and black.

It had obviously been Raven fans who had done the vandalism this time around, and it had basically confirmed Neil's suspicion of Riko selling the pictures.

The thought had made Neil feel sick, and no longer like he wanted to kiss Andrew anymore that day. Jean left the room, and went back to his and Kevin's dorm once Kevin had passed out in his drunken state, and Jean felt better going back to the room after that.

Neil sat despondent on the bean bag while watching the TV as reporters swarmed Wymack at the court. Andrew sat beside Neil with a steady hand on Neil's neck.

Wymack called out the Raven fans, called for a response from Edgar Allan. And Edgar Allan responded with a backhanded response, calling off their fans.

Tetsuji related the foxes to dogs, and it made Neil's hands curl into fists on his lap.

On Monday, it became clear that the team wouldn't be smooth sailing for a bit. Aaron wasn't speaking to anyone. He was volatile and rude, and Neil recognized that he was lashing out.

Kevin was withdrawn around Neil, acting like a scared puppy about to be scolded, but hard on everyone else. Kevin's backside into being volatile towards the team meant that Seth was fighting back.

Seth tried to take a swing at Kevin, which resulted in Andrew taking a swing at Seth.

Andrew taking a swing at Seth meant that the upperclassmen separated again from the cousin's. And yet again Nicky was thrown into the middle.

Nicky was stuck between a rock and a hard place. His loyalty to his cousins meant he felt the need to stick by their decisions, but his friendship with Seth had brought Nicky that much closer to the upperclassmen. Neil could tell Nicky was struggling. Andrew was as aloof as ever with everyone else. And Aaron seemed hellbent on being alone. So Nicky struggled with who to go to, until finally he just sat the entire practice on the outskirts of every group.

Wymack noticed the change in the foxes, and surprisingly enough he went to Neil.

"Want to explain what the fuck is going on?" Wymack asked after practice. Andrew stuck close to Neil.

"Aaron is having a tough time with something personal right now," Neil started, "Kevin feels bad for something he said to me but doesn't have the balls to apologize so he's taking his frustrations out on the team. Seth got pissed at Kevin and took a swing. Andrew protected Kevin and swung back. The upperclassmen didn't like that Andrew took a swing and are now pissed. Nicky is caught in the middle and just wants someone to talk to him."

Wymack stares at Neil for a moment, "That is the most complicated fucking web of bullshit that I've ever heard and it has such a simple answer. Just fucking talk to Kevin."

"No." Neil says firmly, "He blatantly told me I should have stayed at the Nest. If he wants to fucking apologize, he can grow a pair."

Wymack stares at Neil in shock before rubbing a hand down his face, "I'll talk to him."

Come Tuesday, practice started with Neil getting pulled out to center court by Kevin. Neil had almost groaned, but he held back.

Kevin takes a deep breath and Neil wants to hit Kevin for doing this in front of the entire team.

"I wanted to apologize," Kevin said, "What I said was wrong and—"

Neil holds up a hand, "No. You're pathetic regret isn't enough here Kevin."

Kevin wheels back as if he'd been slapped, his mouth dropped wide open.

"I've been protecting you since I was six years old," Neil shoves a finger into Kevin's chest, "I've stood up to all kinds of people for you, and never asked for anything in return. And I know that you're scared of Riko, but I won't be. I won't stand behind someone and watch him have control over me. I've decided I'm not standing in front of you anymore either."

Kevin's face pales.

"You don't need me. You have Andrew. I trust that he'll keep you safe. But I'm moving forward because I deserve to move forward. Kevin you will always be my brother, but I won't be silent and let Riko walk all over me. I won't lay down and let him hurt me anymore either. If you want to continue to bow to Riko, do it from behind Andrew. But you won't force me to bow, not today and not ever. I'm moving forward, and if you want to keep up with me, I suggest you get some fucking therapy and move forward too."

Neil turns to walk away, but Kevin's voice stopped him.

"So that's it then?" Kevin asked, anger pitching in his voice, "You're done with me?"

"That's your choice," Neil responded moving to the sideline and grabbing his racket, "Not mine."

If at all possible, Kevin was more volatile at practice than Monday. Though after Neil's speech, Kevin focused his anger primarily on Neil.

Neil knew Kevin was scared. Neil was a constant in Kevin's life, someone who was there since forever. Neil saying he wouldn't stand in front of Kevin anymore probably sounded like

abandonment.

It wasn't. But Kevin wouldn't hear that argument. He was too stubborn.

Neil snapped back at Kevin with just as much ferocity as Kevin dished out. It evolved into Andrew coming to stand between them threatening. But luckily that meant that Nicky and the upperclassmen relatively smoothed things out. They still treated Andrew to a wide berth, but that was nothing new. And Aaron still wouldn't speak to anyone.

Come Wednesday, Neil and Andrew had their sessions with Betsy. And while waiting for Betsy in the waiting room, Andrew found out his car wouldn't be getting fixed.

"I'm sorry," Neil said quietly after Andrew stopped playing the voice-mail. "I didn't know they hit your car quite so bad."

Andrew glanced at Neil, "I'm not the one who had naked pictures of myself all over campus. Weren't you going to start worrying about yourself?"

"I can't help but feel responsible," Neil said.

"Well stop with that." Andrew fired back. "It's annoying."

When Betsy finally got Neil into her office, Neil didn't speak. He was too busy thinking over his options.

Neil had been young when he'd been on the run with his mother. He'd only had a year with her. But she had beaten the locations of their hidden money stashes into his mind in that time. And you don't ever forget beatings quite like that.

Neil wasn't sure if the money would still be there. He hadn't thought about the money since he'd stopped trying to escape the nest. He'd brought it up to Betsy that one time in a session,

but he'd never actually entertained the idea of getting the money.

The closest stash was three hours away in a forest. Neil remembered the marks to guide the way that were there all those years ago, but he couldn't be sure if they were still there now.

It was a long shot, but it was possible. Andrew and Neil could leave after practice and drive to where Neil knew the stash was. They could just have the opposite person driving back. It'd be late. They'd miss night practice and it would definitely piss off Kevin—

And just like that, Neil's mind was made up.

"I think I'm going to take Andrew hiking tonight," Neil said grinning slightly.

Betsy grinned and their session continued as normal. She didn't question Neil's long pause to think.

Neil didn't bring it up to Andrew until after practice.

Andrew stared at him for a long time when he finally did

"Consider it one of your runs for this week," Neil expressed, "In fact I'll drop all the runs if you do this."

Andrew looked thoughtful, and then shooed Nicky, Aaron, Kevin, and Jean to their rental cars. Andrew followed them and drove them back to the tower, Neil in the front seat of Andrew's rental car.

As soon as they were all out, Andrew tore out of the parking lot, and Neil and Andrew were off. They stopped at a store, at Neil's request, and Neil bought a shovel and a map.

Neil used the map to direct Andrew to the locations. And about thirty minutes away from their destination, Neil looked at the sky and winced.

"It's going to rain," Neil said unhappily.

"Sure picked a hell of a day to bury a body Wesninski," Andrew said.

Neil rolled his eyes, "The shovel is for digging something up, not burying something."

Andrew didn't respond, and only continued to drive until Neil told Andrew to pull up to the side and stop. Andrew did as asked, but didn't stop glancing at Neil.

Neil ignored the stares, and grabbed the shovel. He heard Andrew's footsteps following him, but Neil was checking the treeline.

"Did you hear me Abram, go to that sign and take a right! Abram, pay attention!"

There was an old road sign that was now slightly bent. Neil grinned and walked down to it, trying to forget the icy feeling of fear Remembering these directions gave him.

Neil hopped over the ditch, landing hard on the other side. Andrew followed and Neil helped to steady him with a grin.

"Are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on?" Andrew asked.

"Maybe I just wanted to take you someplace quiet," Neil grinned.

Andrew rolled his eyes, and Neil sighed.

"I don't want to tell you unless I'm certain it's here," Neil said.

Andrew accepted that answer.

"ABRAM I TOLD YOU TO PAY ATTENTION! MOVE FASTER!"

The next landmark was a giant rock. Neil searched and kept walking, almost losing hope, when he finally found it. Neil grinned, walked over to the rock, and then he took 12 steps away from it.

Neil shoved his shovel into the ground and started to dig. Andrew sat down at the side and watched Neil work.

Neil groaned when it started to rain, and he threw his head back in frustration. But still he continued.

Andrew didn't comment on the fact that now they were both getting soaked, instead he watched Neil with an intense glare on his face.

Finally Neil hit a tin box, and he whooped in happiness. He jumped down into the hole and grabbed it, before trying to get back out. Andrew grabbed his hand and pulled Neil up out of it.

Neil opens the tin and checks out the money, before handing it over to Andrew.

"There should be about a quarter of a million in there," Neil said, honestly he's pretty sure it was a tiny bit more than that, "Take it, for your car."

"Is this—"

"The money that was supposed to save my life years ago? Yeah. My mother beat the directions to all of them into my very young brain. Truthfully I only remember seven, but there were 20, all with varying amounts. If I ever collected all of them there would be 4 million in my pocket, seeing as we already used 1 million during that first year. I don't need it though, take it for your car."

"I don't need a sugar daddy Wesninski," Andrew tosses the ton back to Neil and Neil catches it and hands it back to Andrew.

"Just take it," Neil says, "It's not of any use to me. I wouldn't be able to run now, and besides I have you. I don't need the money."

"And I don't need anything," Andrew says, thrusting the money back to Neil.

Neil knew why Andrew was being obstinate of course. Taking this much money meant you were in debt to someone.

"Consider it a payment for protecting me," Neil said.

Andrew shot Neil a glare, "We don't have a deal."

"Then make one with me," Neil responded.

Andrew glares, "Then pick something other than protection as what you gain. It's too late to make a deal for that now."

Neil huffs and thinks about what he wants. There were a lot of things but—

"Stop taking the cracker dust," Neil finally said, "You don't need it. It's an unnecessary risk."

Andrew glances at Neil. "Of all the things you could have chosen—"

Neil cuts him off by showing the tin into Andrew's hands. Andrew stares at it as if it's Pandora's box.

The rain hadn't slowed, in fact it sped up even more so that Neil's hair was plastered into his face. Andrew's blonde hair was darkened by the water, and dripping from where he'd swept it out of his face. Andrew's clothes were plastered to his body, all of his muscles were defined through the black fabric.

"Will you kiss me?" Neil asked before realizing that sounded like he was trying to get a kiss for the money, "I mean as separate from the deal. You obviously don't have to—"

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked.

Neil nodded before realizing Andrew wanted a verbal answer, "Yes Drew."

Andrew's fingers threaded through Neil's hair, and Neil put his hands behind his back. Andrew kissed him, and the breath left Neil's body.

Neil was a clumsy kisser, extremely unpracticed with reciprocation of the kiss. But Andrew knew how to kiss, and he kissed Neil as if the world was ending in two seconds. And Neil began to feel like he was floating. Like he would be carried away by nothing but the pres of Andrew's mouth.

Honestly it wasn't a bad feeling to float away to. Andrew paused and Neil opened his eyes. Once Neil's eyes were opened Andrew released his hair. It was then that Neil realized he was panting and slouching in arousal from nothing more than a kiss. Andrew held out his hands, and Neil placed his hands inside of Andrew's. Andrew glanced at them for a moment before setting Neil's hands onto each one on Andrew's shoulders.

"My shoulders and up are a yes until it's a no," Andrew said finally.

Neil's eyebrows shot up.

"But Andrew how could you—"

"When Drake was torturing you, you refused to touch me. You've kept every promise you've made to me. You follow my boundaries without question. You called me instead of jumping off a roof. You've never lied to me." Andrew responds. Neil doesn't know how to respond to any of that. He hadn't been expecting a real response from Andrew.

But yet, maybe Andrew did it because he knew Neil's hesitancy. Neil paused.

"My neck and up are safe too," Neil said back, "Don't ever choke me. I'm not into that."

This time when Andrew pulls Neil in, Neil cards his fingers through Andrew's hair. Andrew traces the smaller hairs on the nape of Neil's neck as he kisses Neil for what felt like hours.

All while the rain continues to pour around them.

Chapter 42

Neil awoke from a nightmare on the morning of January 19th. He glanced around and breathed easier when he found Andrew staring at him.

Normally Neil got up first. But when he turned over and looked at the date on his phone, Neil knew he needed to call Betsy.

Neil's birthday had never been a happy affair since he turned six. His six birthday had been the beginning of the worst years of Neil's life. He could map out the times perfectly. He could tell what time his mother and he woke up that morning. He could say what time his mother spotted his father's men. He remembered the moment that they started to run for their lives. Neil remembered the moment that they were caught and thrown into a vehicle. He remembered his mother's screams, and the blood. He remembered his father making Neil check for his own mother's pulse with shaking hands. He remembered his father making him hold and drag his own mother's dead body. He remembered Nathan's sick grin as Neil dug his own mother's grave at six years old. He remembered his father pulling him away before he could even get two inches of dirt over his mother.

It was likely so that they could better dispose of the body later, but it felt like disrespect to not properly bury her.

Neil remembered being put in front of Kengo. Remembered Kengo's hands—

"Abram," Andrew's voice cut through the storm of Neil's mind. Andrew's fingers were twisted in Neil's hair, grounding him to reality.

Andrew's eyes searched Neil's face.

"It's my birthday today," Neil explained.

Andrew had been in the session with Betsy when Neil had explained why he disliked his birthday so much.

Riko had a sick and twisted version of the word birthday gift.

"Riko used to remind me of that day somehow every birthday," Neil said.

Andrew was silent, his hand in Neil's hair was all Neil needed.

Classes that day went by in a blur, Neil hardly paid attention to anything around him. The game against the Terrapins was later, and Neil found himself trying hard to pull himself to the surface.

After classes, Neil went back to his dorm and laid in bed. When Andrew got back, Neil left the room and sat with him in the window.

They didn't speak, but rather they each smoked their cigarettes in relative silence. Neil still hadn't gotten around to calling Betsy, but it was on his list of things to do that day.

"I need to run to the court today," Neil told Andrew suddenly.

Andrew said nothing, he just nodded in acceptance to Neil's request.

Kevin still wasn't speaking to Neil other than to fight, so when they left he didn't even offer Neil a glance. Jean put a hand on Neil's shoulder though, a brief 'Happy Birthday without actually saying the words.

Neil started running before the foxes all got ready to leave. Andrew's group was still waiting on Nicky and Aaron, and the upperclassmen hadn't even left the building yet.

Neil let the day bleed away with the pound of his feet on the pavement. He let the wind blow his hair around, and he breathed for what felt like the first time all day.

He was first to the court by only a few minutes. He waited outside so his team could see he got there safely. When the rental cars pulled into their parking spots, Neil stood up and went inside.

He could hear the upperclassmen joking around behind him, and he smiled as he kept walking. He looked back as he opened the locker room door; Andrew's group had still not made it inside yet.

Neil didn't have time to digest that information, because as he opened the door there was a tearing sound. And then Neil was covered in thick red liquid.

Blood

There were gasps, but Neil was frozen in shock, his hands shaking as he took in the room in front of him. Panic filled and grabbed inside his chest in an icy grasp.

The walls were covered in pictures. They weren't pictures of Neil's naked body, or anything like that. Instead they were photos of a younger Neil. The pictures looked like they were taken from security and traffic cameras. Neil could recognize his mother's form anywhere though. Even if he had trouble remembering much else, he remembered her.

They were pictures from his year on the run. There were pictures of his mother's bloody form. There were pictures of him meeting Kengo. All tied together with red string, like a police investigation board. In the center of the room was a picture of Neil, back from his first day in little league. And in the center was a knife soaked in blood.

Neil backed up, and slipped on the blood under him. The smell was suddenly intense, he began to dry heave at the smell. He looked down at his hands, which were covered in blood.

"What the fuck happened?" Wymack's voice sounded far away.

"He opened the door and suddenly he was covered in blood!" Nicky's voice sounded farther.

"Neil, yes or no?" Andrew asked.

Neil could see Andrew. But he couldn't formulate the words.

Finally he managed, "Get it off me," The words were broken, vacant. Panicked.

"Touch, yes or no?" Andrew asked.

Neil managed a nod, and Andrew hoisted Neil up by the armpits. Andrew dragged Neil through the lounge and into the showers. Andrew paused, and Neil looked up.

Happy 19th Birthday Junior.

A broken noise exited Neil's lips.

"Why can't he just leave me alone?" Neil said brokenly, verging between exhaustion and panic, " Why does he have to do this every goddamn year?"

Andrew didn't respond, instead he yanked Neil to the other set of showers.

Neil heard Jean explaining to the upperclassmen about Riko's yearly birthday gift. Neil's head was buzzing. He forced himself to rationalize that this wasn't the nest. He tried to tell himself that no one was coming up behind him and trying to hurt him. And when that didn't work, Neil solidified himself in the idea that as long as Andrew was there, he was safe.

The door to the girl's shower shuts behind them. Andrew turns on the water and shoves Neil under the spray. The cold water jolts Neil back to reality. Though panic still sat in his chest.

Andrew hadn't stripped Neil at all, so Neil's wet clothes clung to his body as Andrew scrubbed Neil's arms. The water was blood red as it ran down the drain.

There was a knock at the door, and Andrew yelled for whoever it was to come in.

Renee stepped in quietly, the stall to the shower was open, so Neil could see her as she stepped in.

"Seth is going to head back and grab Neil some new clothes. He needs your dorm keys though. Do you want him to grab you anything?" Renee speaks quietly.

Neil sinks to the floor in his wet clothes as they talk, and he pulls himself into a ball.

"Tell him to bring Nicky," Andrew says. "Nicky will know what to grab for me."

There's a jangle of keys, and the sound of Renee catching them. Then the door opens and she's gone.

"Coach can't call the cops," Neil mutters. "We can't point fingers—"

"He already knows," Andrew says.

Neil sighs as Andrew massages soap into Neil's hair.

"Do you have a hair pulling kink or something?" Andrew asks. Neil wonders if he'd imagined the smirk in Andrew's voice.

"If you pulled my hair I'd probably panic," Neil says. "But this is different. It feels like what my mom used to do to make me fall asleep before we went on the run."

Andrew's hands paused in his hair. They resumed moments later, so Neil just kept talking.

"When dad was really mad sometimes, and I was too scared to sleep because he was breaking shit downstairs. My mom would hold me against her chest, and run her fingers through my hair." Neil said. "It calmed me down enough that I'd sleep until my father came up looking for someone to take his anger out on. Usually me. After he was done using his knives on me, mom would bandage me up and hold me like that again."

"How old were you when it started?" Andrew asked.

Neil shrugged. "I don't remember. My clearest memory of my father is my sixth birthday. But I don't remember his face. He appears in my nightmares as a snarling bloodthirsty monster. Probably something my young brain made up. I never looked his picture up, I don't want to remember what he really looks like."

Andrew starts to clean the blood off Neil's neck. There was some scrubbing involved, Neil had sat on the ground long enough for the blood to dry a bit.

The water going down the drain though was much less red. But still the panic was there.

"I only kept my last name because it's the last thing connecting me to my mother. I was too young... I don't remember her maiden name. And if you look up my father it never has anything to say about my mother." Neil says. "Not even her name."

Andrew doesn't respond for a moment, "Do you want help with your upper body?" Andrew asks.

Neil smiles weakly, trying to force himself out of his panic with snark. He leaned more against the wall though due to exhaustion. "Is this an excuse to get me naked Andrew?"

"Wesninski I could come up with something better than covering you in blood." Andrew deadpanned.

Neil laughed weakly, panic still tight in his chest, before removing his shirt. The fabric made a slapping noise against the ground. For a second he was self conscious. His upper body was littered with scars and brands, and even though Andrew had seen it all before, Neil still got nervous.

Andrew was quick and methodical when washing Neil down, never leaving any room to question if a touch was sensual. It made the whole thing okay. It also made Neil wonder what it would be like for Andrew to touch him like that. Neil pushed that thought away quickly though, he didn't want that thought to morph and mix with his thoughts about the Ravens.

Andrew stepped out of the shower when Neil asked, and waited by the door while Neil cleaned his lower body.

Andrew kept his eyes pointedly on the ceiling. And out of curiosity Neil wondered how badly Andrew *wanted* to look. Neil shook off that thought for another time. He was already feeling enough in his chest due to panic. His mind kept finding its way back to the pictures.

A towel was set by the shower door for him, and he wrapped it around his waist. Not long after, another knock happened on the door. And Seth appeared inside.

Seth kept his eyes down as he dropped off the two bags of clothes, and then Seth left.

Andrew and Neil did their regular routine of facing away from each other. Neil worked to get on his underwear. His breathing was still quick, and he could feel the undertones of panic in his chest. His breathing picked up as he struggled with his underwear. His hands kept dropping them.

"Do you have pants on?" Andrew asked.

The question hung out there for a second, while Neil finally got a grip on the cloth and pulled it up his legs.

"Yeah," Neil responded, counting his underwear as pants, he wasn't about to make Andrew wait through his shaking attempts to pull on shorts. And Neil trusted Andrew enough not to need that extra layer.

"Turn around," Andrew said. And Neil wondered if Andrew thought Neil had peaked.

"I am turned around," Neil said indignantly.

"Towards me you dumbass," Andrew said.

Neil was unsteady due to panic, so he nearly fell over when he turned around.

Neil's breath caught in his throat, and he immediately choked on it.

Andrew's torso was completely bare, and Neil could see every muscle Andrew had on his upper body. Neil's head was waring with all kinds of emotions. Panicked because of the shit that was in the locker room. Pride that Andrew trusted him enough. Attraction to Andrew and his goddamn muscles.

Despite having sweets and ice cream practically every day, Andrew had abs and a strong core. Neil figured Andrew would, after all Andrew followed the college sport training regiment, and definitely spent more time on his strength than the rest of the team.

Neil turned his burning red face away and struggled with his shorts. Before promptly slipping on the wet floor. Luckily Andrew caught him, but then Neil saw Andrew's muscles flex at the motion. And Neil's face burned brighter. The touch grounded Neil though, and Neil relaxed easily into it, despite the skin on skin contact that normally sent him spiraling.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked.

Neil wasn't sure what he was agreeing to in complete totality. But he knew Andrew would never do what the Ravens had done. Andrew would never force. Andrew would always stop. And touch with the blonde was okay. It made Neil feel safe.

"Yes," Neil responded without hesitation.

Maybe it was stupid to trust a person this much. But Neil couldn't find it in himself to care. He knew if Andrew ever crossed a line, he'd never recover to trust someone again. Not after having such unflinching trust in the person holding him up. But at the same time, Neil knew Andrew would never break it. Neil knew Andrew would never cross that line.

Andrew turned Neil so that Neil's side was against Andrew's front.

Neil didn't understand why Andrew had done what he'd done. Not until Andrew pulled Neil's head against his chest and sank down to the floor against the benches.

Neil's ear was pressed against Andrew's chest. He could hear Andrew's slightly quickened heartbeat. Without any clothes to muffle it, the heartbeat was strong and grounding. Andrew's hand sifted through Neil's hair. The panic that Neil had been riding since being dunked with blood slowly ebbed into an exhausted state.

Andrew was holding Neil exactly like Neil's mother had when he was younger. It made his eyes sting with tears.

Neil forced them back, knowing that they'd need to get moving soon to be ready for the game. He didn't have time to cry at the moment.

Neil hesitated for a moment.

Andrew had said that shoulders and up were a yes until it was a no.

Neil kissed Andrew's cheek.

"Thank you," Neil said quietly. But his face burned red. He tilted his face down, and covered his face with his hands.

He thought he felt a shaking to Andrew's chest. Not fear, but slight laughter.

But when he looked up Andrew's face was blank.

"If it's any consolation Wesninski," Andrew said, "Neither of us are virgins but you still blush like one."

Neil's face burned hotter.

Neil's face was still burning when they went back out to the team. The blood had been mopped up from the entryway. But the pictures were still covering the locker room. Andrew grabbed Neil and tugged him past as fast as he could. And Neil forced himself to look away from the knife stuck through his old picture.

Dan smiled weakly at Neil as he approached. Neil opened his mouth to explain, but Dan waved her hand.

"Jean explained already," She said. "Are you okay?"

Neil wasn't okay. Neil hadn't been okay for a very long time. His hands were still shaking, he had been distracted by Andrew in the showers, but the distraction hadn't been maintained when he had to walk through the locker room.

"I need to sit out the first half," Neil said quietly. "I'm too shaky to be put out there right now. I promise I'll kill it the second half though."

The foxes were silent. And Wymack was the one to break in, "That's fine kid. Did you get your gear?"

Neil shook his head, and he had no desire to walk into that room again.

"I'll clean all that up," Neil said, "I'll clean it up after the game."

"I'm assuming that we can't call the cops about this," Wymack said.

Neil nodded, "We can't point fingers at Riko," Neil says, "It will end badly."

Wymack sighed.

Neil could see Jean's face was saddened, but Neil couldn't see Kevin's reaction. Kevin was facing mainly away from Neil, but based on the tense to Kevin's shoulders. Kevin's emotions were likely negative.

Andrew suddenly appeared beside Neil holding out Neil's gear. Neil hadn't even realized that Andrew had left his side to go back into the locker room. Andrew had his own gear slung over his shoulder.

Neil went between floating and perfect clarity throughout all of the warm-ups. The constant back and forth was jarring, and Neil could see how Kevin especially was growing frustrated.

First half was a blur that Neil couldn't remember if he'd tried. Andrew stayed beside Neil, his hand finding the back of Neil's neck if Neil ever strayed too far.

Half time came, and Neil's hands were still shaking.

The foxes watched Neil with thinly veiled concern. Neil knew he'd have to make his entrance onto the court soon, but he didn't know how well he would play.

The first half had brought the two teams to a tie. 3-3.

But Seth and Kevin were tired. Neil could feel Kevin's irritation rising with his exhaustion. Maybe some part of Kevin had been telling him not to pick a fight because he was in the wrong, but Kevin's exhaustion must have pushed that last little bit of clarity to the side.

Andrew sat beside Neil on the bench. He was working on his gloves so he could go on for Renee in the second half.

"Can you play kid?" Wymack asked. A bit of concern was mixed in through his voice.

Neil knew he had to, but still he hesitated.

Kevin scoffed. Apparently his anger was running high. The mixture of emotions coming out in the only way Kevin knew how. Anger and biting remarks.

"Thought we were moving forward Nate," Kevin bit out, " So much for that."

It was like a switch flicked in Neil's mind, because Neil moved before he'd processed the emotion in his chest.

Pure rage.

Neil had Kevin pinned against the lockers in seconds. The metal made a heavy clang as Neil slammed Kevin's back into them.

Kevin's eyes shot over to Andrew, but Neil snarled.

"Fuck no Day," Neil said bitingly, "This is between you and me. Stop calling for your fucking guard when you're scared, or better yet stop making those types of remarks at all."

Kevin had more than a foot on Neil, but still Neil held his ground.

"Now you listen closely because I'm getting sick of this shit. You think you get to throw out those comments, and make me feel like shit during your prissy little temper tantrum? No. You fucking don't. Do I have to remind you what I've done for you? Do I have to show you every single one of my scars in order for you to understand that I've been raped, bled, beaten, and fucking abused for you? Do you know how much it cost me to get you and Jean the fuck out of there? Do you know how much I had to fucking pay?"

Kevin's face hadn't softened but he was pointedly not looking at Neil. And Neil laughed. It was an awful and twisted laugh that made Neil want to tear out his own vocal chords.

"But I guess you don't give a shit Day," Neil said, "You don't give a flying FUCK, that I live with their brands on my skin. You don't give a DAMN, that I can't move my torso without pulling at scar tissue. That K I live in chronic fucking pain because of how much they broke me down. I don't even notice it anymore because it's been there for so long. I don't know what it's fucking LIKE to not feel fucking pain Day. I bet you don't give a shit that my own fucking Nickname was turned into a trigger, because you obviously have no fucking problem saying it."

Kevin had met Neil's eyes, his mouth falling open in shock. Neil should have calmed at this, but it only caused his anger to surge. The moment had been brewing for so long. Sitting under his skin waiting to rise forward.

Neil grinned it was the face he sometimes saw on his father's face at night while Neil cried in fear.

"Do you want to hear how they touched me Kevin?" Neil's voice was low and whispered, his hands shook, "Do you want to hear how I think my body is absolutely disgusting because of what they've done to me? Do you want to listen to how I look in the mirror and want to tear my own fucking flesh off because they are on me every damn time!? I'm stepping forward and thinking of myself for a change, and you want to throw a fucking TANTRUM!?"

Kevin stares at Neil in shock. And Neil finally let's go.

"Don't talk to me Day," Neil said. "Not until you sort your shit out."

Neil's rage took him out of the locker room and to the side lines of the court.

The second half started, and Neil got a yellow card within five seconds of the whistle.

Neil checked, and pushed, and clawed. Anger a strong driving force in his mind. He scored five times in rapid succession.

And when he walked off the court, the foxes had won 3-8.

Neil walked past Kevin without a second glance, ignoring the words Kevin shouted after Neil to make him wait. Neil skipped the showers and tore off his gear. He made a passing comment to clean the locker rooms the following morning to Wymack. Before he burst out the door and into a run back to the tower.

The foxes took a long time to return. Neil briefly wondered if something else had happened to them. But after rage simmered out, he felt ashamed. He hadn't meant to get that mad.

His tongue felt like ash as he sat in the shower. Neil hadn't closed the bathroom door. He had just stripped and climbed into the shower, turning the water as cold as it would go and turning himself into a ball.

A part of Neil said he'd been too harsh, and that he needed to go back and apologize. Neil hauled himself up and pulled on some underwear. His gaze found the mirror.

He hated what he saw. His body was littered with names and scars. Two bite marks were scarred on his neck and left shoulder. He wanted to break the mirror. He wanted the image to be gone.

He hadn't realized he'd called Betsy until he heard her voice.

He didn't say anything, but Betsy didn't need him to, she calmed him down without prompt. She prattled on about her day. She told him she'd gone to the game. She scolded him for a moment where he'd nearly broken his neck.

Andrew came in not long after Neil hung up the phone with Betsy. Neil felt better, and had shoved one of Andrew's hoodies on. Neil heard Aaron yelling at Andrew as Andrew stepped through the door, but Andrew slammed it shut and stalked over to the window.

Neil sat down in the sill easily.

"Argument with Aaron?" Neil asked.

Andrew stared at Neil for a moment.

"We argued over why I killed Tilda," Andrew said.

Neil nodded, the argument had been a long time coming.

"You need to let him go, you know," Neil said, "You can't give him everything he needs in life."

Andrew was silent for a moment, "He doesn't need her."

"But she understands him," Neil shot back.

He already knew they were talking about Katelyn.

"Everyone needs someone like that," Neil responded. His eyes fall on Andrew's face and Andrew scowls.

"Don't look at me like that," Andrew said, pushing Neil's face away, "I'm not your answer, and you aren't mine."

"No," Neil responded, "But I'd like to think you've helped me find a few."

Neil's gaze falls to the grass outside.

"I don't think anyone could be our answer," Neil said, "But it's okay because we both understand that."

Andrew is silent. And Neil doesn't glance at him, but he can feel Andrew's gaze on his face.

They fell into silence, Andrew handed Neil a lit cigarette.

"You mentioned chronic pain to Kevin," Andrew said, " You've never said anything about it before."

Neil shrugged, "It's been there since I was seven. At first I didn't notice it because I was in pain for other reasons. But the aches are still better than the pain at Edgar Allan. I guess I have a high tolerance."

Andrew was silent, "The scars are uncomfortable?"

"Yeah," Neil said. "But it's another thing that I don't really notice anymore."

Andrew is silent for a moment before flicking his cigarette butt out the window.

Andrew doesn't talk, but he holds out his hand and Neil takes it.

Andrew sits Neil down on his bed, and tells Neil to take off his shirt. Andrew grabs a bottle of lotion off his dresser, and walks over to Neil.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asks.

Again Neil's not sure what he's asking for, but he also knows Andrew wouldn't ever ask for more than Neil could give.

"Yes."

Neil is shocked when Andrew begins applying the moisturizing lotion to Neil's shoulders and back. Andrew digs his thumbs into Neil's muscles, dragging the tension out of Neil's back

and shoulders.

They sat in silence, Andrew working his hands along Neil's back, never going too low.

"We were just getting some food," Neil said suddenly, "My mom and I, I mean."

Andrew pauses, his hands hanging over Neil's shoulders.

"We were in California." Neil continues, "And suddenly my father was in the store with us. I made a mistake and made eye contact with him. I'd turned to my mom too quickly, he might not have noticed if I hadn't made such a big deal out of it. But I was six years old and stupid."

Andrew had moved so that he could see Neil's face.

"He caught us near the beach. My mom and I ran but I wasn't fast enough and I got us caught. My father shoved us into a car. His men were there. They tortured my mother the whole way back to Baltimore. They'd shoved me in the trunk. They never stopped the car even once, except to switch drivers."

Andrew's hand went to Neil's neck. And Neil breathed through his panic. His breathing relaxed and Neil continued.

"My house had secret tunnels for disposing of bodies. They dragged us through them and took us to the cellar. I watched my dad cut my mother, over and over again. My father's secretary and body disposal person, Lola, made me keep my eyes open. Told me to be good."

Neil breathed again, "They all laughed the entire time. My mother eventually went quiet, and they shoved me forward to check her pulse. I think they knew she was dead, they just wanted me to be the one to confirm it. My hands were covered in her blood after."

Neil laid back on the bed, surprised that his back didn't protest as bad as it normally did.

"They'd normally cut up the bodies and would dispose of them that way, but they made me drag out her corpse. Made me dig a hole while a thunderstorm raged around me. Made me drag her into the hole and cover her with a foot of dirt. I don't know what they did with her after that. But they threw me into a trunk again. And they made me stand in front of Lord Kengo. Kengo told them to strip me down, and he—"

Neil's voice caught in his throat, and he clamped his eyes shut. He swallowed.

"He inspected me. Asked if he could spend the night with me, and be my first. And then he was. He said it wouldn't hurt, but he lied."

Andrew was quiet.

"Happy Birthday to me," Neil said sadly. "Because what kid doesn't want to get beaten and raped and watch his mother die on his birthday. And what kid doesn't want to have that day replayed and resurrected every year."

Neil finally glanced at Andrew, who was staring at the bed between his feet. Neil couldn't read his expression. But then Andrew stands up and goes to the kitchen. For a moment Neil hears rustling out in the kitchen. Then Andrew reappears with a box.

"Happy birthday," Andrew says quietly. "New life. New you. New type of Birthday."

Neil opens the box and sees strawberries covered in chocolate. His stomach doesn't clench like it used to at the sight. Instead he picks up a strawberry and eats it.

The strawberry taste is stronger than the chocolate, but the chocolate adds a sweet flavor to the strawberry. Neil instantly is in love.

"This is so good," Neil says with a grin.

Neil glances up at Andrew and almost drops the strawberry because Andrew has a small quirk to his lips. So minute that Neil almost missed it. A glimmer in Andrew's eye.

"Will you kiss me?" Neil asks.

"You're pushing it," Andrew said, "It's a bad day for you—"

"But it doesn't have to end that way," Neil interrupted, "I promise I won't push myself."

Andrew searches Neil's face for any sign that Neil might be lying.

Andrew finds none, so he kisses Neil deeply. Neil finds himself laying down with Andrew over top of him. Their bodies didn't touch, and Andrew made sure no part of Neil was pinned.

But as Andrew's body blocked out the rest of the world. Neil tangled his hands into Andrew's hair, and felt completely safe.

Chapter 43

Neil awoke slowly the morning after his birthday. Until he realized there was a hand holding his own, and then he froze.

He opened his eyes slowly, his body in fight or flight mode. But the tension drained as soon as he saw Andrew's hazel eyes staring at him. Neil relaxed and went back to sleep.

Then Neil snaps awake, because Andrew was in bed with him.

"Did we sleep in the same bed together?" Neil asked, his face burning red.

"That would be why I am in your bed Wesninski," Andrew said boredly, "You fell asleep playing with my hand last night."

Neil glances to where his hand was holding tight to Andrew's.

"Did I ask first?" Neil asked. He really hoped he didn't just grab Andrew's hand without asking. That wasn't a safe zone.

"You sounded like a drugged up toddler but yes you asked," Andrew responded, "You sang a stupid song and tapped my fingers to the beat."

"I don't remember that," Neil said.

"You were tired," Andrew responded.

Neil yawned, still feeling tired.

"Did you at least get some sleep too?" Neil asked.

"Yes Junkie," Andrew responded. Andrew sat up and Neil took in the sight of his messy hair.

"I'm constantly annoyed by the fact that you look so good all the time," Neil said.

Andrew rolled out his shoulders as he left the room, "95% Wesninski."

"Oh are we doing the percentage again?" Neil asked gleefully, "Good I thought maybe you had already tapped out of our game."

"96%."

Neil got dressed and headed to the stadium not long after. The taste of Andrew's mouth still fresh on his lips. His hair still messed up from where Andrew had been holding on to it.

Neil had full intention to clean up the mess in the locker room, but when he got there, it had already been cleared away. Neil stared around confused for a moment, when suddenly Wymack's voice cut through his thoughts.

"Abby and I cleaned it up last night after the twins fought. The foxes decided against a victory party after that. So Abby and I cleaned the locker room instead. The upperclassmen helped out. I assume Andrew got back to you before you did something stupid, seeing as you're here."

Neil nodded, "Yeah but I also called Betsy instead of doing said stupid thing. You guys didn't have to clean it up, I would have gotten it."

"I didn't want you to have to kid," Wymack said, " While you're here though I have some things I could use a hand with."

Neil gives Wymack a questioning glance, and the only response he gets is a "come hither" jerk of the head. Neil shrugs internally and follows Wymack back to his office. Where a stack of papers is dropped in front of him.

Neil stares at it for a moment, before slowly turning his head up to Wymack.

"Am I being punished?" Neil asked.

The stack was as thick as his arm.

"No," Wymack gruffed, " I'd think of it more as a reward."

Neil glances at the stack of papers again. "Wow, you must be old if you think paperwork is a reward."

Wymack sighs. "You know sometimes I think I might be able to forget how much of a smartass you are. And then you loop right back around to being a pain in my ass again."

"Do you have frequent pain in your ass? Because it sounds like you might want to see a doctor for that. I think Abby is available." Neil says.

Wymack covers his face with his hand, "No this isn't punishment Neil," Wymack says, "I want your input. Because I trust your input."

Neil looks again at the stacks, and sees that it's player files. Wymack wanted *his* input.

"You know," Neil said, "If you are so into masochism... I'm sure Abby could just whip you or something."

Wymack stares at Neil in exasperation.

"Just go through the damn files. Give me four." Wymack said.

Neil grinned, and he began his task. He sifted through files easily, he stared at player stats and records. And not only that but he looked at the players themselves.

He wondered which players were like him. Which ones needed a second chance the most. He stared at them and wondered which ones would grab the Exy stick with both hands, and wouldn't let go because it was the only chance they had.

Neil looked at the clock and realized he'd barely gotten three pages in, in a matter of hours. Wymack wasn't doing much better.

The man looked at every kid with eyes that said he wanted to personally take every single one of their pains.

Neil was suddenly hit by the fact that Wymack was keeping him as a player. Had stood by him through so much shit. He was hit by the fact that Wymack knew Neil might die at the end of the year, but still treated Neil as if he would have the rest of his life.

"I know I'm a pain in the ass," Neil said suddenly, "But I want you to know it's because I trust you never to hurt me. Coach Moriyama made me fear him. He made me fear being an individual. He made me fear being myself. You've never done that."

Neil swallowed.

"You deserved a chance, kid," Wymack said, "Hell, I don't think I've ever met someone who deserved a break more in life."

They fell into silence.

"Thank you," Neil said.

Eventually when it hit around Noon, Neil managed to narrow it down to a few options. He even threw in an extra one.

Wymack glanced at it. "You've given me five."

"In case I don't survive the year," Neil explained. "I figure I can at least help you find someone to replace me."

Wymack's hand clenched around the pen in his hand. Neil could see so many things in Wymack's eyes, so many words the coach wanted to say.

"I hope you plan on making it through this year," Wymack gruffed finally, "Because I fully plan on making your completely alive and breathing ass Vice Captain next season."

Neil's breath halts.

"You can't—"

"I can," Wymack responds, "And I'm going to."

"I might die," Neil explains weakly, "You can't just tell me you're giving me a position I might never get to have."

"We are closer this year to winning championships than we have ever been before," Wymack says strongly, "Neil that's because of you! From day one you have led. Seth just signed with a pro team, and I was pretty sure that boy would overdose and be dead before his final year! Aaron and Andrew are actually talking about their issues, even if it was fighting last night! Jean is more open than I've ever seen him be. Even Dan, the captain of this team, has been following your lead as you throw this team together."

"I haven't been trying to do any of that!" Neil said. "It just happened!"

"And I say that makes one hell of a leader." Wymack says, "Someone who leads by example. And can pull a team together without trying. Simply because that's who they are. You didn't preach growth Neil, you showed it. And they all have seen it, they all were watching."

Neil's breathing was ragged. "I don't deserve this."

"Give me one reason why you don't," Wymack shot back.

Neil's words died in his throat. Because he didn't have a reason. It was an internal gut feeling.

"I can't," Neil said. He tugged at his hair. He needed to leave. He needed to not think about any of this. "I need to go."

Neil turned and went to leave. But he stops when Wymack speaks again.

He watches as Wymack puts aside the striker he'd chosen to replace himself.

"There's no replacing you Neil." Wymack said.

Neil let out a shuddering breath before he sprinted from the room. His chest heaved and he found himself falling to his hands and knees on the concrete outside the court.

He breathed in and out. Trying to stave off his panic. But his chest was tight.

"Neil?" Andrew's voice cuts through the storm. And Neil let's another shaky exhalation of breath exit his lips.

He realized that his phone was pressed to his ear, and he let out another shaky breath.

"Can you pick me up?" Neil asked quietly.

There was no response, and Neil looked at his phone to see that Andrew hung up. Neil sighed and tucked his hands over his knees, before burying his head in them. He fisted a hand in his curls and breathed deep. Attempting to do as Betsy had taught him.

Three things.

Sidewalk.

Rock.

Empty coke can.

Neil hated how suddenly thinking about his possible demise at the end of the year was scary. Hated how, where he'd been sure before, he was now anxious.

Three things.

Court.

Car.

Cloud.

There was this new fire inside Neil. This new burning desire to live. It was undeniable now. It was terrifying. Because at least before if he died he didn't care. If he'd lost at the end of the year, he'd just do the one thing he'd figured he always would. But now... now dying meant losing the foxes. Nicky's chatter. Seth's dumbassery. Dan's mothering. Allison's makeovers. Renee's kindness. Matt's support. Aaron's quips. Jean's pranks. Kevin's drive.

It meant losing Andrew.

Neil pushed that final thought away, because Andrew wasn't the type to do "forever". But yet still, the thought of losing him, *any of them* , left Neil's heart aching in his chest.

Three things.

Tires.

Bird.

Andrew's shoes—

Wait.

Neil glanced up, Andrew was crouched in front of him. Honestly, for a moment, Neil had forgotten he was on the way.

Neil wondered how long he'd sat there.

Andrew was staring at Neil boredly.

"Get me away from here," Neil said, "I don't care where we go. Just not here."

"We were almost to the interstate," Andrew responds. He holds out a hand and hoists Neil up, he has to steady Neil a bit when he stumbles.

Neil climbed into the rental car, so far only Andrew had yet to turn his in.

Kevin was in the front seat, and for a moment it looked like he was going to say something. But then a hand slapped the back of his head.

"Turn around Kevin," Jean said from his place in the back seat with Neil, "You did enough last night. Start another shit storm and Andrew won't be able to stop me from killing you."

Jean wouldn't kill Kevin. It was an idle threat. But it was enough to make Kevin turn around dejected, because disappointing Jean was something no one enjoyed doing. It was only a step down from disappointing Renee.

Neil was still exhausted from his panic. And Jean's lap was inviting. Neil stared at Jean, wondering if the backliner would mind if Neil slept in his lap. Jean was reading a book, glasses perched at the end of his nose.

"Do you mind if I lay on you?" Neil asked exhaustively in French.

Jean's head shoots up to look at Neil. His eyebrows raised.

Neil was touch-averse. But there were exceptions now. He doesn't know when those exceptions came about, but they did. But still Neil wouldn't fall asleep on someone. Hell, Neil hardly slept.

Jean doesn't respond, but he uncrowded his legs and pats his lap for Neil to lay down. Neil does so, and closes his eyes. He only doses lightly. Then he feels Jean card fingers through his hair, and Neil hands himself over to sleep.

He wakes up when Andrew stops the car. He sits up and looks around to see that they'd stopped at a dealership.

He sits up, and Jean folds his glasses and bookmarks his page. Neil follows the others out of the car, not wanting to be left alone with his thoughts.

Kevin and Andrew walked off into the lot, and Neil decided to stay with Jean. Jean and Neil stayed indoors, a nosy sales rep kept coming over to them and asking questions. Which Neil pointedly ignored and continued to look at car magazines which were equally as boring. Jean politely declined the sales rep... multiple times.

Eventually the rep walked off and Neil sifted through more magazines until he found a sports one.

"They put baseball as the front page," Neil said disgustedly, "Do they want to go out of business?"

"There are people that actually like baseball, Neil." Jean said with a grin.

Neil slowly panned over to Jean. "Those people need serious mental help."

Jean stared right back at Neil, "Tell me how many times a week you see Betsy again."

"Shut up," Neil says. "Exy is a healthy obsession."

"Says the guy who'd rather die than leave the court," Jean responds with a smirk.

"I fail to see how that's unhealthy," Neil says, "I am getting exercise."

"General rule of thumb is that if you use the word 'obsession' for it... it's probably not healthy." Jean responds back.

"Well, the general rule of my middle finger says go fuck yourself," Neil snaps back.

Jean laughs loudly and they continue on in silence. Neil quietly found joy in the quips Jean sent him though. His quieter brother was speaking, showing his true colors. Showing the fire that he'd had when first arriving at Edgar Allan. Neil finds another magazine and is lulled into reading it by the news playing on the television in the background.

Eventually Andrew popped inside and found a sales rep. Neil found another magazine and ripped it when it was baseball again.

"You cannot harbor that much rage for a single sport," Jean said.

"Do not tell me how much rage I can harbor," Neil said spitefully, "It only fills my rage canister more."

Andrew waved Neil and Jean over after closing the deal. Neil watched as the sales rep tried to shake Andrew's hand, and Andrew just stared at it, before dropping her pen on her hand that was outstretched.

Andrew's new car was sleek and, to put it simple, luxurious as fuck. Andrew shoved Neil into the front seat, much to Kevin's apparent displeasure. But Kevin's response was to ride with Jean.

They rode in silence, Andrew seemed to test how fast the new car could really go. And Neil found that he enjoyed staring at Andrew's face while the other drove.

"You're staring," Andrew said.

"Mmm," Neil hummed, "Should I start saying that whenever you stare at my ass then?"

"97%" Andrew responded.

Neil felt his heart clench as Andrew spoke. He could lose this. He could lose Andrew. Lose the foxes. But Neil was also concerned with something else. For the first time ever, he wondered if they would be okay if he died.

There's no replacing you Neil.

"Do you think the foxes will be okay if I don't survive this year?" Neil asks.

Andrew doesn't respond. Instead his grip tightens on the steering wheel.

Neil pauses before his next words.

"Will you be okay?" Neil asks quietly, "I mean this—"

"There is no 'this'," Andrew says. There's a rage in his voice. The bottomless anger Neil had only seen hints of, rising to the surface. "I'm not attached. I hate you, remember."

Those words eased something inside of Neil. He was okay with that.

"And the foxes?" Neil asked.

"You won't have to worry about it," Andrew responds.

His jaw is clenched tightly.

"But—"

"Weren't you the one who said that we were going to beat the Ravens this year? Are you really giving up so easily?"

"I'm not!" Neil insisted, "I just— I'm scared. Wymack wants to make me captain next year. I want to get there. I want—"

Andrew grabs Neil's chin in a tight grip, his eyes flare golden in his rage. Something that makes Andrew both beautiful and terrifying. They were stopped at a red light.

"Then stop acting like you're going to die," Andrew growls, "And fucking live instead!"

The words resonate inside of Neil. He wants to live. He wants to spend time here.

"What if wanting to live includes you?" Neil asks.

"It shouldn't," Andrew responds, shoving Neil's head away.

He digs into his pocket and throws a key at Neil. The spare key to his car.

Neil holds it, and realizes how much he'd already intertwined with Andrew. Andrew might not be attached, but Neil was. He'd take whatever Andrew was willing to give him.

"I don't think you decide that," Neil says quietly.

Andrew's hands tighten on the wheel again. "98% Wesninski."

When they get to the rental car place, Andrew signs papers and gives the keys back. They are leaving when Andrew's phone buzzes.

Andrew checks his phone, types something, and closes it.

Moments later it buzzes again, and Andrew pauses, pulls out his phone, reads it, and taps the top of it a few times.

"What's your favorite food, Wesninski?" Andrew asks.

Neil looks at Andrew, "Strawberries."

Andrew stares at Neil as if Neil was literally the most stupid person on the planet.

"I meant dinner food," Andrew responds.

Neil stares at Andrew with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't have one," Neil responds back.

"He likes Italian," Jean says.

Andrew nods, types something back to the person who messaged him, and then leads the way back out to the car.

The ride back is silent. And Neil shuffles up to his and Andrew's dorm when they get back.

Neil and Andrew seem to stay somewhat separated after their conversation in the car though. Neil figured Andrew might need time alone afterwards.

It wasn't until later that Andrew came into the bedroom. He chanced a glance over at Neil. Neil had been sitting in the dark, a full moon in the sky showered enough light through the windows that he didn't need a light.

Now though he was thankful he hadn't turned it on. Andrew's form was bathed in silvery light from the moon. His cheekbones and jawline were more prominent.

Neil was struck by how Andrew made him feel. There was no one else who made him feel things this strongly. No one else who he trusted to press against him and kiss him until his mouth was numb.

Then stop acting like you're going to die, and fucking live instead.

"Andrew—"

Andrew was already in front of Neil.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

Andrew pressed Neil into the mattress, being sure to keep Neil's hands free. Andrew's forearms went under Neil's, and Andrew's hands fisted in Neil's hair.

Andrew kissed him like it was their last day alive. Their bodies hardly touched, but Neil ran his fingers over Andrew's scalp as they kissed.

He flushed when he felt himself getting hard, it was normal when Andrew kissed him. But this time Neil had a thought that made him flush harder.

Andrew pulled away when Neil paused to think. For a second Neil worried his lower lip.

"You think loudly," Andrew said.

"I want to try something," Neil said nervously, "I uh—"

Neil flushed. And Andrew's eyebrow rose.

"I want to try... I want to try getting off," Neil turned red. It felt weird to admit he wanted something. "But I would be... uh... touching myself... but you'd be here... nevermind... this sounds weird. It probably—"

Andrew cuts Neil off with a kiss, their lips moving and melting together with practiced ease.

"It's a yes," Andrew mutters. "What do you want me to do with my hands?"

"Keep them in my hair," Neil says.

Andrew obeys, and Neil sticks his own hand in his pants. He pauses before grabbing himself.

Could he actually do it?

Neil takes himself in hand. And then pauses, because he really had no clue what to do. He'd never really done it before.

He figured he'd stick to the obvious, and he began to move his hand.

Andrew didn't once look down. He didn't try to touch, or kiss Neil.

Though Neil wouldn't have minded the latter.

Quiet gasps exited Neil's lips as he moved his hand, the grip in Neil's hair was grounding him.

It wasn't the Ravens.

It wasn't Kengo.

It wasn't Riko.

It wasn't Proust.

*It was **him** and Andrew.*

"Twist your wrist near the top," Andrew instructs.

Neil does so, and has to cover his mouth to keep the noise he made held back.

"Don't," Andrew said, "You can make noise. Everyone else is two rooms over making dinner."

Neil releases his mouth, and another high moan exits his lips.

Andrew continues giving instructions to Neil on how to move his hand. And Neil is panting as Andrew helps Neil take himself to his finishing point.

"You can—" Neil breathes out heavily. Another moan escaping his lips. "You can kiss me," Neil finally manages.

He's rewarded by lips on his. He moans into the kiss. Neil breathed in the smell of cigarettes as Andrew kissed him.

Neil came with a moan while kissing with Andrew.

And for a moment he was fine. He felt good, but then he felt something settle in his chest as he felt the stickiness on his hand. His chest was tight. He wasn't sure what the feeling was.

Andrew pushed off of him. His eyes on the ceiling.

"It was fine," Neil said to himself, "Why am I—"

"Because you need a second to process," Andrew supplies. "Go."

Neil felt relieved to step away into the bathroom. He wiped the stickiness off his hand, and then pulled his phone out to message Betsy.

To Betsy:

I got off with Andrew there with me... it was a yes... and then after it didn't feel right.

From Betsy:

Likely because you needed a second to process things.

To Betsy:

I don't know how I'm supposed to do that.

From Betsy:

Was it consensual?

It had been.

To Betsy:

Yes.

From Betsy:

Did you enjoy it?

Neil had. Though honestly his past sexual experiences would not be hard to beat.

To Betsy:

Yes.

From Betsy:

Did your partner enjoy it?

And Neil wasn't sure about that. He wasn't sure if Andrew had enjoyed simply watching Neil get off.

To Betsy:

I haven't asked him yet.

From Betsy:

Ask him when you finish collecting yourself. Breathe. You did fine Neil. I'm proud of you.

The words shouldn't have been such a comfort, but yet they were. And after about five more minutes, Neil was able to stand and face Andrew again.

Andrew was sitting in the window, smoking a cigarette, and Neil joined him.

"It was consensual," Neil said, he hoped Andrew understood he was looking for confirmation.

"Yes."

"It felt good... for me," Neil said. He opened his mouth to ask the question he needed to ask, but it caused him to pause. And he rubbed at his thighs.

"Was it okay for you?" Neil finally asked quietly. "I mean I know you didn't get much out of it--"

Neil trailed off. His eyes falling to his lap. His previous understanding of sex was skewed to all hell. Years with the Ravens had told him he was meant to bring other people to pleasure... not himself.

Months with the foxes had him questioning this, but still he didn't know how it was supposed to work.

A hand on Neil's chin had him looking back at Andrew.

"Just because you didn't notice what I got out of it," Andrew said, "Does not mean it wasn't there."

Neil shuddered under Andrew's gaze, and his eyes flicked to Andrew's lips.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asks.

Neil of course answers yes.

Neil's phone buzzes while they kiss. The kiss was lazy and slow. And Neil found he never wanted it to stop. But his phone cut off all activity.

Neil pulled it out of his back pocket and furrowed his eyes at the message. Andrew gazes at the screen, as Neil hadn't bothered to hide it.

The number was unfamiliar. And the message was even more confusing.

"48"

Neil frowned.

"Someone got the wrong number," Neil muttered.

He shoves his phone into his back pocket. They probably would have returned to kissing, but then Jean interrupted with a knock on the door.

Andrew pulled Neil from the room, and down the hall to the girls' room.

The foxes all sat around a table, a heaping pan of lasagna in the middle of it.

Seth was in the middle of telling a story about pretending to be Nicky's boyfriend to get some homophobic prick to fuck off.

"I was like a knight in shining armour!" Seth says smiling.

"Seth... baby..." Allison said spooning Lasagna onto her plate, "Your face looks like it got hit with a mallet 95 times."

It was true, Seth's face indeed did look beaten to all hell.

"It's alright," Seth said, throwing an arm around Nicky, "It was for my best friend. Also I promised Eric I'd return you as pretty as I found you."

Nicky laughs, "Shame you can't do that for yourself."

Seth whacks Nicky on the ass with a wound up towel, and Nicky tackles Seth to the floor. They roll around for several minutes before Nicky starts poking Seth's sides, and Seth starts begging for mercy.

Mercy is given but not kept as Seth then claims war.

Neil smiles. "What's all this?"

"Okay so don't get mad," Dan says throwing her hands up.

"That's normally what someone says before passing someone off," Neil says.

"It's for your birthday," Dan says, before quickly adding on, "It's just dinner. Super practical. No gifts. Just something nice we wanted to do. We won't even sing or anything."

Neil spies Kevin in the corner, who's already drunk.

"You won't be able to stop Kevin from singing," Neil said, "You'll all regret hearing it."

But still he sits down and has dinner with the foxes. Kevin does indeed end up singing, and dancing. But honestly the dancing made the singing bearable.

Who doesn't love dinner and a show, even if that show involves a literal train wreck.

Seth tells jokes and tells Neil he finally named the Basil plant.

Neil hadn't known the Basil plant needed a name. But apparently it was now called Neil. And in a surprising turn of events... there were four more plants in the window. And also Seth planned on naming every one of them after Neil.

A fern got Abram.

A bonsai tree got Nelly.

A cactus got Abe.

And the Orchid got Wes.

And apparently that was now the future names of Seth and Allison's children.

Neil found that especially amusing. All in all, it was Neil's favorite birthday ever.

Neil would have forgotten about the weird wrong number the previous day, if not for a second message coming in while Andrew kissed Neil senseless.

Andrew had paused while Neil checked his screen.

The unfamiliar number was back. And this time it was the number '47'.

Andrew couldn't see the screen, but a sharp inhalation of breath from Neil made Andrew shift slightly.

"We may have a problem," Neil breathed out.

He flipped the phone towards Andrew, who stared at it.

"Who do you think—"

"Riko probably," Neil says, "I mean I know there's others out there who could do this, but only Riko has the means right now."

"What happens when it reaches zero?" Andrew asks.

Neil furrows his eyebrows, "I'm not sure."

The two of them end up pulling out a calendar and staring at the dates. It ended on March 9th. There was a game that day, but it wasn't an interesting one. And Neil huffed.

"Do you think maybe he's just trying to throw me off?" Neil asked, "Make me screw up and fail before then. It kind of seems like he pulled the date out of his ass."

Andrew, in a rare display of fidgeting, was tapping his fingers quickly on the table while thinking of the date.

"We are playing in New York that day," Andrew says, "That place important to you?"

Neil shook his head, "Not at all."

Andrew stared at the calendar again before standing up. Andrew grabbed both his own and Neil's keys before leading Neil out of the room. Andrew strode towards the girls' room.

"You can't tell the foxes," Neil supplied, "If they know too much—"

"I'm not telling them," Andrew said.

Andrew knocked on the door and, when it was pulled open, Renee stood there with a soft smile.

"Get your stuff," Andrew said, "We are teaching him how to fight."

Renee's eyebrows shot to her hairline, but she nodded before sending a smile to Neil. "I'll be joining you guys in a moment, go ahead and start without me."

Neil hadn't expected them to go easy on him. But they were much more intense than Neil thought. Renee pulled no punches, and if Neil got hit she didn't coddle him. Even if he was on the ground Renee came after him. Neil found himself evading much more than attacking.

Andrew, who was normally careful never to hold Neil down, was pinning Neil. Telling Neil how to get out of course, but the way out was never easy.

To say that his first day of sparring proved that Renee and Andrew had been going easy on him up till this point was an understatement, Neil hadn't even landed a hit. He definitely hadn't gotten a knife off them.

He took pride in the fact that both of them had pushed so hard that they were hunched over and breathing hard as well.

Neil had never seen them go that hard before. They were expelling all that energy for him. To keep Neil safe. To teach Neil how to protect himself.

"Thank you," Neil said quietly.

"Don't thank us yet," Renee breathes, "You're still terrible. You're amazing at evasion though, which I could have guessed."

"You need to be able to get out of a pin before they can handcuff you," Andrew adds in.

Neil stares at the scars on his wrists. His skin was a canvas of times he failed to win the fight. And Neil resolved that if he got a new scar, it would be from a fight he won.

"Same time tomorrow?" Neil asked, clenching his fist.

Renee grinned, the sun was going down. And the sunset bathed them in golden amber light. Beside Renee, Andrew had a small quirk to his lips.

The upperclassmen, Nicky, and Aaron didn't see Andrew's new ride until Monday when leaving for practice.

Seth was the one who startled everyone by yelling. "THERE'S A FUCKING MASERATI!!!"

At first Neil thought Seth was referring to some kind of animal. It sounded like a type of cat to be honest. But Seth was only pointing to Andrew's new car.

Matt choked on his words, "Holy shit!"

Matt and Seth begged Andrew to start it up, and they both grinned at the sound it made. Nicky was staring in awe at the new ride. Allison and Dan were unimpressed with the actions of their male teammates.

"I don't get it," Neil said, shrugging, "It's just a car."

Nicky scoffed, "Of course you don't. Tell me is there actually anything in your brain other than Exy."

Neil's eyes shot to Andrew on reflex. And Andrew stared back.

Neil's gaze fell back to Nicky, who hadn't noticed the gaze. "Believe it or not," Neil said, "There's actually something I think about more than Exy."

Nicky made a sputtering noise, "Wait! No way! That's not even possible! What is it?"

"It's my secret," Neil grinned.

Aaron rode in Jean's car to the stadium, his cold war with his brother reaching a new level since the fight on Friday. But Neil sensed a shift, and it wasn't just a shift in Aaron. It was a shift in the whole team.

The shift didn't become prevalent until Wednesday. Neil walked into practice to find the entire team staring at the ground in anger.

In the background the news was playing.

"Ex-Raven sex scandal" was flashing on the screen.

"What happened?" Neil asked, startling everyone.

Dan looked up and gazed around, in a silent beg for help.

"Kid," Wymack said, "There was an anonymous tip to the media about you being..."

"A whore," Andrew finished bluntly, "They've been running for a good three hours."

Neil's legs locked up.

"Is there—"

"There's no pictures, only claims and statements" Wymack said, "But Riko implied that they were true when questioned about it."

Riko appeared on screen, and Andrew muted it.

Neil glared, "Let me—"

"No." It was Jean who spoke. "You have no reason to be listening to fucking lies."

Jean's anger stunned Neil enough that it pulled him from his worry and panic.

Jean hadn't sounded that pissed in years. Jean hadn't had that fire burning in his eyes in years.

Neil stepped back out of Jean's way when Jean stormed from the locker room.

Jean had never played so hard as a backliner, not in years.

Practice Thursday showed equal results as reporters swarmed campus. The foxes all took Neil to his classes, and met him again afterwards.

But Neil didn't slip this time. He wasn't scared. He's sure he'd be more out of it if it had been pictures. But the media attention only served to spur on Neil's need to win on Friday. His mind was focused and laser sharp. But Thursday night he still allowed Andrew to kiss him while making himself fall apart. Andrew swallowed every one of Neil's moans with his own mouth.

And Neil swore he heard, "You're doing good Abram" before he drifted off to sleep that night.

On Friday the foxes drove to Arkansas. Andrew and Neil sat in the back of the bus, seat buddies like they normally were.

The two of them pranked a sleeping Jean and Kevin as their entertainment after homework.

SUA wasn't at all a rude team. They'd already lost to UT and Belmonte. As far as they were concerned the game wasn't at all very important. Their pride wouldn't have been gotten back by winning. But despite that they still put up a fight.

At halftime the foxes discovered that Belmonte had been knocked out. Having a rival out of the running, meant the foxes were raring to go in second half.

The customary post game handshake was nicer than usual. Neither team had been especially rude or hurtful.

Neil tried to avoid the press when going back to the locker room. But he still spied from around the corner as Jean and Kevin handled press duty.

The reporters asked many questions about the games. And Neil had been about to leave, but then the next question made him freeze.

"Any comments on the scandal of your teammate Nathaniel Wesninski?" A reporter asked.

Kevin spoke first, "We have no—"

"No," Jean snarls at Kevin, "In fact I do have a comment. I have quite a few fucking comments."

Neil watched as Kevin struggled to maintain his media personality when Jean slipped out of his.

"Neil was underaged during most of his time at Edgar Allan," Jean snaps, "I don't know who gets off on spilling a story like that about a kid who was underaged at that time. And fuck whatever news stations decided to run with it. Even if it was true, spilling that was wrong and whoever did it needs a foot to the ass."

"So it's true?" The reporter asked, ignoring every other thing Jean said.

Jean audible snarled, "No it's not fucking true. Nathaniel never fucking slept around. And I think it's high time that you told Riko to pull his head out of his ass, I think the fumes are starting to affect his brain."

Neil's jaw hung open. He looked up beside him to see Wymack covering his face in annoyance.

"Great... now there's—" Deep inhale, "Now there's two of you."

Jean stepped away from the shell-shocked reporters, and Kevin quickly tried to perform damage control.

There was a glint in Jean's eyes. There was a strength in his shoulders.

Kevin made to yell at Jean after. But the gaze Jean settled on him shut Kevin up.

Jean patted Neil's shoulder as he passed.

"I'm moving forward too," Jean said.

And Neil smiled.

Chapter 44

Neil and Andrew met Renee on the roof every morning before class. And every night directly following practices. The foxes noticed, because of course they did. But Renee must have said something to them, because the foxes kept any comments about the increasing bruises on Neil's body to themselves.

After Jean's comment the press swarmed campus to get a statement from Neil himself. Neil found it irritating, and was glad he was still on suicide watch. Otherwise he might have stuck his knives into every reporter's neck.

On Saturday, Neil got his ass beat in the morning against just Renee. And then Andrew had him pinned in seconds at night.

On Sunday, Neil got a lucky hit on Renee, but forgot to capitalize on it, and managed to get knocked on his ass. But come night time, Neil actually managed to pin Andrew back for two seconds before he was flipped and pinned himself.

On Monday Neil evaded Renee, and managed to survive one minute and thirty seconds before being knocked on his ass. Monday night he got Andrew under him, only to be flipped and pinned on his stomach with Andrew sitting on his back.

Come Tuesday Neil managed a deliberate aimed punch to Renee's stomach. But then he got so excited over the move that he missed the foot coming at his face. And Tuesday night Andrew had to take a minute when Neil finally managed a hit to the groin.

In Neil's defense, he'd thought Andrew would at least be protecting his dick with something during sparring. He didn't think he'd actually cause the blonde to crumple.

Andrew groaned as he held onto his groin in pain.

"I am so sorry," Neil said, "I didn't mean to—"

"You did," Renee says, cutting Neil off. Her gaze was sharp. "You need to fight us like you mean it if you're going to learn. We may be your friends, but an attacker won't be. You don't have time to question what you do then."

Andrew finally stands up, and sets his body.

"Are you—"

Neil steps forward towards Andrew, only to yelp when Andrew takes a swing. Yeah, Renee and Andrew were taking this seriously.

Andrew pins Neil yet again and speaks with a stern voice in Neil's ear.

"If you hesitate, you will die. Possibly worse. Don't fucking hesitate Abram." Neil feels his body tense, and so he relaxes it forcefully and breathes. If Andrew and Renee were treating this like a real fight... well then who was Neil to deny them.

Andrew takes it as a sign to get up.

Don't hesitate Andrew.

Neil sweeps Andrew's legs out from under him and lunges for the knife. Andrew's body hits the ground, but this time Neil doesn't ask if he's alright. Neil flips the knife around his hand with practiced ease.

"Don't hesitate Minyard," Neil smirks.

Andrew was busy catching his breath, "Fuck you."

Renee let's out a laugh.

Press were still swarming the campus come Wednesday, so Neil couldn't go for his morning run. Instead he settled in the window with Andrew. The two eventually forgot their cigarettes in favor of kissing.

They eventually have to stop and they go up to the roof to meet Renee.

When it comes time to leave for therapy, Aaron is standing at the passenger door of the Maserati.

Andrew hesitates, but it's something only Neil notices.

"I want to come to therapy with you," Aaron says.

It's a strongly spoken request, but it isn't a demand. Neil can see how that causes Andrew to pause again

"We need to talk," Aaron says, "And we can't just punch each other every time. Neil said Betsy was good. I'm willing to try."

Andrew's head slowly swivels to Neil, and Neil truly didn't know how he was being blamed for any of this.

Neil shrugs in response to Andrew's wordless question. And Andrew's face turned towards the sky, as if considering his options.

Then he tilts his head as a way to say "get in" towards Aaron.

Neil grins at Andrew, and gets pushed to the ground in response. It causes Neil to laugh.

Neil climbs into the car, along with Andrew and Aaron. And then he blinks. And blinks again.

Kevin is sitting sheepishly in the backseat, pressed up against the door. Andrew turned around to see why Neil hadn't shut his door yet, notices Kevin, and slowly pans over to Neil.

"I am not explaining to Coach why half his team has suddenly decided to get therapy," Andrew says accusingly.

Neil really didn't understand why any of this was his fault, "Why do I have to tell him?" Neil asked. "I'm not the one who is agreeing to take them."

In the end they all four went to Betsy's. Betsy came out to meet them, and paused when she saw four players instead of just two. She raised an eyebrow.

In response Andrew stood, and made a gesture for Aaron to follow. Which left Neil with Kevin.

Kevin was swaying in his seat slightly, and Neil grimaced at the smell of alcohol coming off of him.

"You know she will probably sign you up for an AA meeting if you walk in there shit faced," Neil said.

"AA is for quitters," Kevin slurred, "I'm no quitter!"

Kevin put his hand to the sky in a victorious fist.

"I think your drinking obsession is unhealthy," Neil said.

"It's not unhealthy," Kevin slurred, "It makes me feel less dead inside."

Neil stared at Kevin. Blinked. Then stared at the ceiling.

Maybe Jean had been right when he said that thing about obsessions.

Not long after Aaron comes back, and tells Kevin and Neil to go back for the last fifteen minutes of Andrew's session.

Kevin stumbles into the room. He points at Betsy, "I am absolutely shitfaced right now, so you can hold nothing I say against me."

Kevin pulls out a flask, takes a swig and then plops down on the floor in front of the door.

"I didn't realize he was drunk," Andrew deadpanned.

"Why did you not watch him Andrew?" Neil asked, "Why is he so fucked up right now?"

"No," Andrew says pointing, "It was your turn to watch the child, he was in the backseat with you."

"I was busy daydreaming! You should know better than to leave me with anything that fucking breathes, I can barely take care of myself."

Kevin grabs hold of Neil's leg and starts crying into it.

"You'd be a great dad Neil," A drunken sob, " You are going to have so many beautiful babies with Andrew."

Andrew stares at Kevin, and then pans to Neil, "Did he just imply that I would get you pregnant?"

Neil stared at the ceiling, wondering how he got to this point.

"We are pouring his alcohol down the toilet when we get back," Neil said.

"You think I still won't drink it," Kevin says pointing. "I will chug that alcoholic toilet water."

Jesus fuck how much did Kevin actually drink.

"Kevin, how much did you drink?" Neil asks.

"I only had three," Kevin whines, "Wasn't that many."

"Three what?" Andrew asks.

Kevin hiccups and nuzzles Neil's knee.

"Neil you have..." Kevin burps, "Such amazing legs. You runs so fast in Exy."

Kevin koalas onto Neil's leg.

"Neil, are you alright?" Betsy asked concerned, "We can try and get him off."

"Three what, Kevin?" Neil asks, ignoring Betsy. He'd apologise later.

"Bottles," Kevin said, "Duh."

Kevin started petting Neil's shoe like it was a dog before drinking out of his flask again. Neil takes the flask and throws it across the room. Kevin blinks at his lost flask. And then pulls out another.

"I've never seen him this fucking drunk," Neil said.

Neil took the flask and threw that one too.

Kevin had another one.

"How many do you have!?" Neil asked, annoyed.

Kevin didn't answer, and sank to the floor and bit Neil's shoe.

Neil glanced at Betsy whose mouth was slightly parted in shock.

Andrew was about as shocked as Andrew got.

"Dad," Kevin turned to Andrew, "You need to take good care of my mother, I'll fight you."

Kevin hiccups again.

Neil's face turned bright red. "Why did you drink so much you alcoholic bastard?!"

"Because I was nervous for therapy. How else am I supposed to stop being scared?" Kevin said with an obvious 'duh' in his voice.

There was a moment of silence that passed through the room. Betsy finally seemed to regain her composure.

"Hey Kevin," Betsy said.

Kevin flopped back on his back to look at Bee.

"Kevin, we are going to get you signed up for some mandatory therapy." Betsy said. "You're going to have to see me or you can't play."

Kevin sighed, "Mom I think I made the therapist angry at me. Knew I'd make someone angry at me. Everyone is always angry with me."

Kevin's lip starts to wobble.

"No one's angry at you Kevin," Betsy says gently.

"Speak for yourself," Neil says annoyed.

"Mom—"

"Call me mom one more time and I'll castrate you," Neil growled.

Kevin began to sob, and cry into Neil's leg.

Neil's session mainly consisted of ways to work through his anger that didn't involve taking a knife to Kevin's dick.

The ride to practice was quiet. The twins weren't speaking, and Kevin passed out against Neil in the backseat. Practically in Neil's lap.

When they got to the court, they left Kevin passed out in the lounge.

Wymack watched them enter the court with a clenched jaw, his eye twitching.

"Does someone want to explain why I was missing four members of my team at the start of practice?" Wymack asks. He looks around, "And why am I still fucking missing one of them? Wesninski what the fuck did you do?"

Neil gaped, "I am a fucking angel I did nothing!"

The entire team raised an eyebrow.

"We were told to get therapy," Aaron said, "So we did."

Wymack pressed a hand to his forehead, "Is this going to be an ongoing thing?"

Andrew said 'no' but at the exact same time Aaron said 'yes'.

Wymack's eye twitched again, "And Kevin?"

"Oh, he got shitfaced before therapy and now he's passed out on the couch in the lounge," Neil responded easily. "Betsy is requiring him to attend therapy now. I think she was two seconds from checking him into rehab."

"He got shitfaced before going to see Betsy?" Wymack asked, "There's no way he's that fucking stupid."

"I don't think alcoholism cares much about how intelligent you are," Neil muttered.

Wymack opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut. Stared at Neil for a moment, and then sighed.

"I trust that you and Andrew will take care of him," Wymack said. "Get rid of his alcohol when you get back."

Neil just wanted one day of not being the parent anymore.

"I'm probably going to drink it instead," Neil mutters..

Neil and Andrew ended up pouring Kevin's Alcohol down the drain that night. Kevin's stint at Betsy's had been the drunkest Neil had ever seen him. Neil was sure it came about due to the fact that Kevin hadn't wanted to face Betsy without his liquid courage. But the incident had been the last straw for both Andrew and Neil. They would no longer be enabling the bad habit. They spent time rinsing each bottle, before filling them with concoctions they found online that were supposed to taste like alcohol with none of the effect.

Neil had come up with the idea so it took Kevin a while to go out and buy more of the real shit.

At some point they went through Kevin's stash of flasks and they searched every inch of the room to make sure they got all the bottles. They made sure they put the drinks back as if they had never been moved in the first place.

After they had finished, Andrew asked Neil yes or no. And then they were kissing.

Neil and Andrew somehow ended up on the floor. Neil's hands went to Andrew's hair as they kissed. Andrew's hands in Neil's hair were intoxicating. Neil began to wonder if he could handle those hands other places.

Neil didn't believe in things like "healing touch". He knew Andrew didn't either. There was no touch that could magically reverse the fear he held. There was no caress that could negate the crawling of his skin.

But there was something to be said about the understanding and knowing that Andrew gave with every press of his lips. There was something to be said about the trust Neil had in Andrew. Something about the way that Andrew allowed Neil to breathe. Something about the way that the two of them checked in with each other every now and then.

Neil didn't know if he'd ever be able to have sex or even allow Andrew to see his body completely nude.

But letting Andrew touch him, was something that didn't seem like a distant thought anymore.

Bee would be so proud.

Neil got himself off again, not wanting to push his boundaries without thinking about it first. He didn't want to push Andrew's boundaries either.

Neil called Bee about it the next day after sparring with Renee and Andrew.

The conversation wasn't longer than an hour. But Bee had relieved his fears to a certain extent.

It wasn't until Friday that he asked Andrew. Wasn't until Friday that Neil decided to give it a shot.

There was no game that week, and while normally this meant a trip to Columbia, but Aaron and Andrew hadn't spoken since their session with Betsy.

Neil and Andrew instead ended up watching movies with Seth and Nicky for a short time, before heading out when Nicky and Seth ended up in a giant pillow fight.

Neil thought about heading over to watch Exy with Jean and Kevin, but Kevin hadn't spoken to anyone since his first solo therapy session that morning. The striker had tried and failed to get drunk prior to going. And then when the striker came back, he seemed to sit in a tempered silence that was more thoughtful than upset.

And Jean had been on the phone with a certain sweetheart from California. Neil had smirked when he'd seen Jean in the hallway, grinning ear to ear. For a long time Jean had ignored any attractions he might have had, in the nest they weren't allowed to date. But apparently moving forward meant railing the sunshine boy Jean had been fawning over for years.

Neil strongly approved of this, and thus chose not to interrupt the conversation with thoughts of Exy. Instead he followed Andrew back to their room.

Neil's phone buzzes with his daily countdown number when the door shuts, and Neil can see how Andrew's jaw clenches at the sound.

The slowly dwindling numbers had a way of getting under Neil's skin. He had a certain feeling of wrongness over his theory about the numbers.

But there was no other possible explanation about it. Riko was the only threat free enough to harm Neil in any way. And wiping Neil off the board completely would cause too many people to wonder about whether or not the foxes had had a chance at beating Riko afterall.

The only explanation that made sense was the one where Riko was attempting to rattle Neil, trying to cause Neil to lose focus.

Andrew must have noticed Neil's overthinking, because his jaw relaxed.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked.

Neil's mind snapped back to the present, back to the strong hands that Neil craved on his skin near constantly.

"Yes." Neil responded.

Andrew pressed Neil into the beanbag chair. His arms secured Neil on either side. And Neil was struck by how safe he felt despite being boxed in. Being boxed in by the Ravens had meant pain, blood, restless nights. Being boxed in by Andrew meant protection, safety, and strength.

Being kissed by Andrew meant euphoria, contentment, and stability.

Neil wanted to know what being touched by Andrew felt like.

Neil pushed gently at Andrew's shoulders for a moment, not frantically, but still Andrew instantly stopped, his hands left Neil's hair, his mouth left Neil's lips.

"Touch me, yes or no?"

Neil's words quiet. But he knew Andrew heard him.

"You're pushing it," Andrew growled.

"Myself or you?" Neil asked honestly. "I'm not pushing myself, I swear. I wouldn't ask you for something I didn't want."

"No one should move this fast at recovery," Andrew fires back, "It isn't that easy."

"You're right," Neil said, "It's not but I trust you. You'll stop if I need you to. You always have. And right now it's fine. I know if it becomes not fine you'll be off me in seconds. So if you're worried about me then stop and trust me to know what I can handle."

Andrew is silent. Something is set behind his eyes as he looks at Neil.

"Getting you off with my hand, yes or no?"

Neil breathes out, "Yes."

Andrew's hand is a shocking warmth and for a moment Neil tensed. Neil had both been prepared and unprepared for the sudden weight. As soon as Neil tensed Andrew let go.

"I didn't say no," Neil breathed, "I just need a second to get used to it."

Andrew's hand reappeared, and he waited. When Neil finally relaxed, Neil gave Andrew a nod.

Andrew touched him differently than anyone else had. Neil wasn't sure if it was the touch that was different or the context. Andrew's hands weren't gentle, but they weren't rough either.

They were focused and sure. Nothing about Andrew's touch indicated that Neil should feel shameful. Nothing about Andrew's hand said that Neil should feel controlled or dominated.

Andrew's mouth came to Neil's jawline. And Neil had to cover his mouth because the others weren't two rooms over this time. When Andrew's lips came to his own, Neil allowed Andrew's mouth to swallow whatever noises he was making.

Neil gripped Andrew's hair tightly as he fell over the edge, somehow laying a lazy kiss onto Andrew's jaw before letting his head tip back onto the floor.

Andrew was still above him. And Neil began to feel how he had felt afterwards last time. Neil curled into a ball away from Andrew, trying to make himself small so they wouldn't be touching.

But Andrew pulled away as soon as Neil began to shrink in on himself.

Neil's mind raced as he went through his checklist.

"Neil, I need to know you're okay," Andrew said. His voice sounded shakey.

"It was good," Neil said, "I just need a moment."

There was the sound of footsteps and then the bathroom door clicked shut.

Both Andrew and Neil needed a second after that. But Neil went through his checklist, once, twice, three times.

He was okay. He did okay.

He felt proud of himself.

His body was a tiny bit more under his control.

"Consensual?" Andrew's voice cut through the haze of Neil's mind, and Neil nodded.

"Enjoyable?" Neil asked.

"Don't ask stupid questions." Andrew responded.

The week leading up to the foxes' first death match was literally hell on earth.

Kevin was anal about every little mistake on the court, but Neil could see he was frustrated about something else as well. He'd been sober since Wednesday, and while maybe it was not by his choice. Neil could see a clearer, sharper look than had been there in ages.

Neil just wished Betsy would work on Kevin's abhorrent attitude.

Maybe that was hypocritical.

Neil could see Renee was stressed as well. Her normal place as team support was causing every one of the problems to become hers. Often she sat and watched during their normal sparring sessions. And Neil knew she needed the moments to herself.

On Wednesday, Neil stole a knife off Andrew and managed to pin the blonde on the ground for a solid ten seconds.

Renee had clapped. Neil grinned. And something had relaxed in Andrew's shoulders, something Neil hadn't seen in a while.

Andrew even began participating in night practices, much to Neil's surprise. It had caused Kevin to get upset with Neil yet again.

He'd yelled in Neil's face about how Andrew stepping out on the court means nothing when he doesn't do it freely.

Neil didn't respond to Kevin, instead he walked away and started practice. Andrew only blocked Seth's shots though, ignoring Kevin's in complete totality. And ignoring Kevin when the striker went off about that as well.

On February 9th the foxes hit the court with an intensity that no one expected. The Catamounts were behind by four points after forty-five minutes of the game. Renee had locked down the goal better than she had all season. And Neil couldn't help but give her a hug afterwards.

Renee had smiled as Neil hugged her. Neil couldn't help but be proud of her. Of all his foxes.

The TV reporters were going over the first half's highlights while the foxes listened to what they said. Neil could see the shock and discomfort at the reporter's words.

Dan turned off the TV.

"I didn't think they'd ever have nice things to say," Dan said, tapping the remote against her arm nervously.

Renee grinned. "We issued a challenge to the Ravens this year, I'd like to think we have not disappointed them."

"By 'we' do you mean a certain red-headed spit fire?" Seth grinned.

The foxes laughed, minus Aaron, Andrew, and Kevin.

The foxes were slowly hyped up to an extent that Neil had never seen before. A new stand for their future championship trophy stood proud in their locker room. Neil guessed it was Allison's doing.

People were watching them. People were cheering them on. Neil could feel Riko's frustration at the failure of his little countdown plan.

Neil grinned.

"I'm in the mood to completely ruin the Catamounts' night," Dan said with a sharp grin.

Wymack took that as the signal to start talking. He gave them the pointers and then led them back to the sidelines.

The second half was a flurry of rage and violence. After 20 minutes the score hadn't budged. The Catamounts couldn't get around Andrew, but Neil, Seth, and Kevin were struggling with their backliners.

Neil began to get annoyed with a particular backliner, and purposefully dropped the ball just so that he could legally check the bitch.

Jean had glared at Neil for the old trick. But hey at least it wasn't against Jean.

After that though, the violence escalated. Neil liked to think that despite his size he held his own. He used to be a backliner after all. And he had taken on players twice his size before. But his backliner was shoving him so hard that Neil was struggling to stay on his feet.

Neil could see Kevin was struggling as well where he was.

A fight was going to break out, he just wasn't sure who it was going to be.

Much longer and it would be Neil himself.

Surprisingly it was Andrew who stirred things up. Andrew shouted something to Nicky with a bang of his racket. Then ten minutes later Nicky pulled a blatant foul by sweeping his racket to trip his mark.

Nicky's mark got back up and came at Nicky with fists flying, but Andrew was already there. Using his racket to shove the mark away. The striker almost hit Andrew, which Neil almost hoped for because it would have been entertaining, but Matt and his Mark intervened.

Nicky was awarded a red-card, and he accepted it with grace. Blowing kisses to the stands and flouncing off the court.

A penalty was taken, and Neil braced himself to run. Confident in Andrew's abilities.

Neil tore off the court as he heard Andrew's racket hit the ball. He'd passed the backliners as he got the ball into his net, and he made the shot, goal lighting up red, mere seconds before Neil fucking hit the wall at full momentum.

Neil groaned. And he heard the laughter of his teammates. But he was too happy about the goal lighting up red to be concerned with the bruises he would have the next morning.

"You know you're supposed to stop before hitting the wall Junkie," Andrew drawled when Neil jogged up to his goalkeeper.

"Where would be the fun in that?" Neil grinned.

"I'd assume keeping all your limbs intact would be fun," Andrew responded.

"Sometimes Andrew," Neil said, shaking his head disappointedly, "It's like you don't even know me."

"Your dedication to this sport is disgusting," Andrew responded.

"Says the guy who set that situation up on purpose," Neil fired back, running to his place.

The buzzer sounded with a 9-3 win. And the Catamounts looked thoroughly thrashed when they did their post game handshake.

Andrew didn't join for the post game celebration. But he didn't argue when Wymack told them all to take the celebration to Abby's house.

Neil's phone buzzed with a 28, while he sat outside with the goalkeepers. They had been talking about zombie apocalypses prior to it. But as soon as his phone buzzed, Andrew's shoulders had tensed and Renee had taken it for what it was and left the two alone.

"What if it's something else?" Andrew said suddenly. "What if we're wrong?"

Neil was silent, it wasn't like the thought hadn't crossed his mind.

"Then you protect Jean and Kevin. And I'll protect myself." Neil responded finally.

"I'm getting really sick of this Martyr shit," Andrew fired back with a glare.

Neil shrugged. "Is it really being a Martyr if I plan on coming back alive?"

Andrew was sitting on the hood of his car. It put Neil eye-level with him.

"How can you say that?" Andrew's voice is frustrated.

Neil shrugged, "Because I don't want to lose this." Neil put forth.

Andrew's eyes glared angrily. "There is no this."

"Maybe not for you," Neil said, " But for me it's something I don't want to end."

There was silence at those words.

"How can you want it?" Andrew said. "How can you stand it when you know you're just going to lose it?"

Neil silently watched the house, full of laughter and happiness.

"Because even if I lose it all tommorow," Neil said, " I'll still be glad I had a chance at this. I'll still be glad to have every memory I gained from being here. And if I die... I know I won't just be forgotten."

It was a truth that settled something in Neil's bones. He relaxed now that the words had been said.

This is what he was willing to fight for.

Andrew was quiet. And Andrew didn't get to respond before Abby poked her head out to say dinner was ready.

But Neil left Andrew with one more thing.

"You all give me a life I want to fight for."

Then Neil left to join the foxes.

Chapter 45

The rules changed in round three, from winning games to netting points. Which meant a team could lose both rounds but still net enough points to advance. But this conundrum hadn't happened in years, and was an unlikely scenario.

The Foxes were set to play a home game versus Nevada on February 23rd. Then they had a week off before playing Binghamton on March 9th. The week after the Catamounts was no less taxing despite it being another week off. Wymack had them training like their lives depended on it.

Which now that Neil thought about it. Made a lot of sense.

Thursday afternoon had a TV crew coming to foxhole court. Interviewers wanting to know about the underdogs stealing championships this year. Neil found the whole thing to be annoying, and had already mouthed off to a camera guy. Luckily, for Wymack, the camera had not been rolling at the time.

But that little stint wasn't the only time, unfortunately for Wymack.

"Try and be good," Wymack said shaking Neil slightly by the shoulders, "I am telling you not to be a smartass."

"And I'm telling you no promises," Neil shrugs.

Wymack mutters something under his breath about, "Hiding smartass strikers in a closet until they learn to handle press better."

But either way Neil was placed in front of the press. The interviewer asked mainly questions about the foxes, so for most of the interview Neil did just fine. They asked about Dan and Neil was sure to tell them she was the best captain the foxes ever had. He talked about Matt

and his backliners skills. And he was sure to point out the changes in skill of Nicky, Aaron, and Seth. All of which had been taking Neil's advice on certain issues throughout the year, and fixing them. The interviewer made a joke about Aaron needing to get better to catch up to his brother, the only reason he'd made the team. And Neil had only managed to hold back a glare because Wymack and Kevin made desperate, "Don't do it" gestures from behind the camera.

So instead Neil had smiled. "Every fox that's here deserves a place on this team," Neil said, fully knowing that his grin was completely fake and terrifying, "Wymack doesn't pick players who don't have potential. And Aaron is unlocking his and doing so brilliantly."

Aaron had heard it, and had turned red in the face from embarrassment. Neil hadn't talked to Aaron much since the start of the twins' cold war. He assumed it's because he was more considered Andrew's friend than Aaron's. But Neil could feel a bridge being built after his words.

Of course the interview couldn't just be done after speaking about the foxes. They had to ask something about Riko. The interviewer asked about the Ravens. And about Neil's scandal.

Neil managed to bit his tongue and be good instead of unleashing the holy fucking terror that was his mouth.

But then the interviewer commented on his lack of attitude. Neil looked over the man's shoulder at Wymack, and watched as Wymack huffed out a breath before shrugging. And Neil grinned.

"Actually I was trying to reign it in because the last time I commented on a sub par sports team, my school got vandalized. Let me answer again though, I'll be sure to make this much more exciting."

Neil winked and the interviewer looked like he had just lost the entire plot.

"Yes I am 1000% sure we are going to beat the Ravens this Spring. Because the foxes are always improving and encouraging their players to get better. On the other hand the Ravens

revolve around one very broken mess of a man. They fight to make him feel better about his lack of skills instead of improving their own and that's going to be their downfall. And when the Ravens get beaten by a team full of 'delinquents' and 'good for nothing whores'," Neil said quoting the words he'd seen spread out all over the place online," Then they are going to have to look at a change in their leadership. I personally think it should begin with Coach Moriyama's resignation."

Kevin made a noise that wasn't human and barreled off towards the exit. Meanwhile Neil smirked and winked again at the camera before wandering over to Wymack.

Wymack patted Neil's shoulder proudly, and practice continued.

That night Kevin didn't show up for practice, and Neil left to take Jean, Seth, and Nicky to the court. Surprisingly Aaron hopped in the car as well. And they drove off, leaving Andrew to take care of Kevin. Kevin who'd somehow found more alcohol.

Later when he got back, Andrew followed Neil back to their dorm, and Jean took the liberty of putting a passed out Kevin into bed.

"Did you figure out where he got more alcohol from?" Neil asked.

Andrew opened their fridge and took out a can of beer for himself. He flicked the pop tab at Neil and Neil batted it away and flicked the man off.

"I'm betting from one of the foxes' rooms," Andrew responded. "Either that or Nicky gave it to him."

Neil huffed out a breath and sat on the kitchen table so his legs were criss-crossed. He noticed that he was wearing Andrew's sweatshirt and buried his face in it while watching Andrew sit in the window. After a minute Neil remembered he had homework he needed to be doing, and he got himself situated with his math book opened.

It only lasted ten minutes before Andrew began throwing shit at him. Neil lasted another 15 minutes of having paper, pillows, and an ice cream lid thrown at him before looking up with an annoyed scowl. He looked up just in time to get nailed in the face with Andrew's sweatshirt he'd been wearing.

Neil throws it to the side and sends Andrew a half hearted glare. Andrew responds with an unimpressed gaze.

"You're like a cat," Neil tells Andrew.

Andrew gazes back, "Says the person sitting on the kitchen table instead of in a chair."

And Neil yet again couldn't argue with that.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asks, hopping of the counter.

Neil thinks for a moment, balancing the importance of school over making out.

School?

Neil looks at his books.

Making out with Andrew?

Neil looks at Andrew.

School or making out with Andrew?

Well where was the contest there?

Neil kicked his books off the table and they landed on the floor with a loud thunk. "Yes." Neil responded.

He allowed Andrew to pull him to the edge of the table, and then Andrew's hands were in his hair.

The angle was awkward and Andrew eventually just climbed onto the table with him, vague annoyance at his height shining in his eyes.

Neil's thighs ended up overtop of Andrew's though his legs remained parted to either side of Andrew's body. His arms rested on Andrew's shoulder.

They were kissing when Neil's phone went off. Neil groaned in annoyance before ripping the phone from his pocket and throwing it over his shoulder. Not really caring if it broke or not.

Andrew however watched the phone get thrown and stared at it. Jaw clenched.

Neil watched for a moment before laying a feather light kiss on the juncture between Andrew's ear and neck.

Andrew's shiver was enough of a spur to do it again.

Neil brought Andrew's hands down from his hair and placed them on the hem of his shirt. Neil wanted to give Andrew ground. He wanted what he had with Andrew. He wanted it so badly it felt like a fire beneath his skin.

Warm hands on his skin had him tensing for a moment, but he relaxed as Andrew began to map out area after area.

And when Andrew asked yes or no. Neil said yes without hesitation.

On Friday night they went to Nicky and Aaron's room to play video games. Neil was, unsurprisingly awful at said games. And often had to have Nicky tell him what to do.

Nicky handled his job of teaching Neil how to play with grace. And the night consisted mainly of trying to learn the game so he could finally thrash Andrew at it, the bastard wasn't even trying.

But when it came time to go to bed, Neil had been the one who was thoroughly thrashed.

Another buzz of his phone before he fell asleep, brought with it a night full of nightmares.

Neil awoke feeling the hands on him everywhere. He stumbled from his bed. Almost tripping directly onto Andrew in his escape from the bedroom.

He threw open the window and lit a cigarette before setting himself into the window and smoking with shaking hands. The heel of his palm pressed into his forehead as he tried to regain his breathing.

Quiet footsteps walked across the tile behind him, and Neil could hear Andrew filling the tea kettle with water. Neil continued to smoke until the cigarette was scorching his fingers.

Andrew was the one to pick it from his fingers and hand him a new one.

"Why won't he just leave me alone?" Neil asked brokenly.

Neil ran his hands over his face.

"Can you actually believe I was in love with the asshole," Neil chuckled dryly.

He took another drag of his cigarette.

"How can you be so sure it's Riko?" Andrew questions.

Andrew lights a cigarette of his own and takes a long drag.

"Who else could it be?" Neil questioned.

Andrew is silent for a moment, "You said your father would kill you if he ever got out."

Andrew's words sent a chill down Neil's spine.

"I would know," Neil said, "I would know if he got out because they would have to inform me of his release. Not only that but the media would be all over it."

The words did nothing to relax the tension in Andrew's shoulders.

"And if it is?" Andrew questioned.

Neil inhaled sharply as he thought about it, and he let out a dry chuckle, "Then I'd be dead," Neil said, "No one would be able to save me. And it would be pointless to try."

"Yee of little faith," Andrew says.

Neil feels the anger course through him at that. "Shut up!" Neil growls.

Neil can see the set to Andrew's shoulders suddenly. Tense and waiting for a fight.

"You shouldn't act like you could take on people like my father!" Neil said angrily, "You don't understand how easily he makes people disappear. Not a single one of the bodies he's made has been found. Not one!"

Andrew's glare turned on Neil, "So what happens if it is him!? Do you just want me to watch you go? Am I supposed to let Evermore happen all over again? Break my promise to you again?"

Neil swallows, "It's not him."

"And if it was?"

"It's not—"

"Humor me!"

The request is sharp.

Neil swallows again.

"If it was my father," Neil said, "The most you might get from me is a cryptic goodbye, before I'm taken. Best case scenario would be them killing me right away, making it quick and painless. But more likely they'll take me back to Baltimore. Where I'll be tortured and killed, before they carve me limb from limb and dispose of each tiny piece of me in locations all over the United States. They'd never find my body, and I would remain a missing persons

report until eventually they put my face in the cold cases file where I am forgotten about. You would stay here and keep your nose out of it because otherwise they'd kill you, and they'd kill the people relying on you. They have people in the police, the FBI, the justice offices. You wouldn't be able to beat them."

Andrew is quiet, his jaw is clenched tightly. The set to his shoulders had gotten worse throughout Neil's entire explanation.

"It's not them," Neil said, "I would know if it was. They'd have to tell me of his release."

Andrew's shoulders relaxed but only minutely.

They smoked for another hour before going back to bed. Andrew stared at his bed for a solid ten minutes before grabbing Neil's shirt sleeve.

Neil paused and glanced at Andrew's hazel eyes.

"Sleep with me," Andrew says, "Yes or no?"

Neil blinked a few times before stuttering out, "Yes."

They slept face to face, their breaths intermingling on Andrew's pillow. Before drifting off to sleep, Neil kissed Andrew's forehead. He giggled when Andrew batted him away. And at some point their hands ended up entangled together. Their legs winding together in the haze of sleep. And there was nothing but safety filling Neil's mind.

The week leading up to Nevada's match was exhausting. And Neil found that more often than not, he ended up in Andrew's bed for the night or vice versa.

The night practices grew more tiresome when Aaron started attending. Kevin moved from berating Seth, to berating Aaron. And Kevin's Alcohol had been removed entirely, this time

though, Kevin knew he was being cut off.

So night practices would happen and Neil more often than not left the court feeling irritated and riled up. But at night that fell apart under Andrew's hands.

On Thursday Renee's mother closed on a house, and all the upperclassmen freaked out about it. Neil found it amusing as they all agreed to go and help out with the moving process.

Neil went through practice that day in a blur. And found Andrew on the roof instead of in their dorm.

"Renee's mom is moving," Neil said with a grin, "You'd think she closed a deal on a mansion with how the foxes are acting."

Andrew glanced at him. But he didn't respond, Neil hadn't expected him to.

"What are you going to do after graduation?" Neil asked Andrew.

Andrew shrugged, "I don't bother with thinking that far ahead," Andrew said, "It's a waste of my time."

Neil huffed out a laugh. Then paused. "I want to move somewhere like Colorado. I've never been there before. Actually I haven't been alot of places. I kind of want to get a cat... maybe three."

"Cats?" Andrew questioned.

"They aren't as touchy as dogs," Neil said, " But they are so soft. I've never gotten to have a pet before."

Andrew watches Neil closely. And Neil takes a leap.

"I'd like to stay with you," Neil said.

He flushes as the words leave his mouth. And Andrew's only response is a tightened jaw and a sharp, "Shut up."

Neil still grins at that.

"We should go someplace for spring break," Neil said. "I'd like to try something like a vacation at least once."

Andrew was silent at that.

"Not California," Neil adds suddenly.

Andrew nods, "That's where you and your mom got caught right?"

"It's also where Drake was," Neil said.

Andrew gives no response other than a slight hum.

They don't talk much more after that, and Neil actually finds himself drifting off. He feels himself get pulled against Andrew's shoulder, and Neil drifts off to sleep against Andrew.

He woke up briefly to give a 'yes' to Andrew carrying him downstairs. And he slept peacefully that night. Waking up to Andrew's hazel eyes staring at his face.

"Staring," Neil grins like he'd just won a gold Olympic medal, and Andrew shoves him off the bed.

Neil got to all his classes on Friday, and even managed a nap before the game against Nevada.

Nevada was a frightening opponent, and they just barely avoided a shoot out at the end with a well placed goal from Seth.

The mixture of Andrew's lockdown of goal, and the mixed attempts of the frontline, was the only reason the foxes pulled through.

Neil had run over and hugged the striker, beyond proud of the man that he'd been training since the beginning of the year. Neil watched as Kevin even gave Seth a fistbump.

The foxes celebrated, and Neil walked over grinning to Andrew.

"Junkie," Andrew said, slinging his racket over his shoulder.

"I'm not sure if you mean for you or Exy," Neil said.

"I hate you," Andrew responded.

Neil grinned.

On Thursday, practice was canceled. Edgar Allan was going against Maryland. And Penn State was going against USC. It would be the first year that one of the big three would be going home before semi-finals. And Kevin dragged the entire team into watching it.

Someone had scheduled the games to be hosted by Edgar Allan and the Trojans. Which meant that the foxes could watch the games back to back.

Neil ended up in the back with Andrew. Kevin in front of them with Jean. Dan hung papers with the four teams' cumulative points up.

Neil knew the Ravens would win their match, it was a given. Maryland wasn't a hard opponent for a team like the Ravens.

The Trojans vs Penn game however was a toss up. Neil knew the Trojans deserved the win. Jeremy Knox was a person programmed into his phone back at Edgar Allan. And not long after getting his new phone, Jean had put Jeremy's number in again.

Neil didn't communicate much with Knox, the boy was too happy for Neil's taste. But Jean perked up when he saw the Sunshine Boy step out on the court. And Kevin perked up at the sight of his favorite college Exy team in general.

Watching the big three play, sent a nervous twist in Neil's stomach though. He'd forgotten he'd have to clear these opponents before even facing Riko again.

When halftime came, Dan muted the TV.

Neil's stomach twisted and his breathing picked up. Andrew's hand went to the nape of his neck.

"We really need to step it up guys," Dan said nervously tapping the remote on her thigh.

Neil heard Kevin scoff, and ideally he knew that Kevin had no clue what his words were doing to Neil. Kevin didn't know the deal Neil had made.

"Even if you had stepped it up a year ago when I told you to," Kevin scoffed, "You'd still not have had a chance at beating them."

Neil's hands tightened in his hair, because all of this was too much.

He had only just turned 19. He hadn't even reached his 20's yet. And yet he had a countdown on his phone, he had trauma built up higher than the empire state building, he had his entire life riding on a game he wasn't even sure he could make it to.

Kevin opened his mouth to speak again, but Andrew threw a water bottle at him. Neil didn't wait to see if it shut Kevin up. Neil left the room, gasping for air.

Neil slid down outside the room, listening to the foxes panic inside.

"Is he okay!?"

"Jesus Kevin—"

"Why is he so upset? I only told the truth."

"Shut up," Andrew said over all of them.

Neil heard the following silence, and a sharp "Don't." From Wymack.

Andrew suddenly had Neil's neck in a grounding grip. He dragged Neil from the depths of his mind.

"I'm tired," Neil says honestly. "I'm tired and I'm scared. And I want to feel safe. I want this mark of death I carry around to go away."

Andrew's grip tightened. He let go and reopened the door while keeping a grounding hand in Neil's hair.

"We're leaving," Andrew said.

There were protests, and protests about the protests. But Neil only focused on Andrew. Andrew who led Neil out to the car. Who drove Neil home. Who pulled Neil to bed, and into an embrace.

Into an embrace that made Neil feel completely and totally safe.

And Neil drifted off into nothingness, ignoring the buzz of the next number in the countdown.

Chapter 46

The ride to Binghamton was long enough to have every fox pulling out their hair, and yet still too short to qualify the college paying for airfare. This meant that the foxes were up at five and on the bus before six. Factoring in the various stops and traffic, Neil was prepared for it to be a long ride.

Neil smiled as the upperclassmen made an unyielding case to Wymack about getting a TV for the bus. Wymack argued for all of an hour, before finally relenting that if they won championships he'd do it. The foxes knew that it was a yes no matter what though, and they smiled.

Then the conversation of course got taken over to movies.

Jean and Kevin had long since learned to never fall asleep in the seat in front of Andrew and Neil. And Wymack had berated Neil last time for the amount of clothespins that had to be picked up after their last prank. So Andrew and Neil mainly sat in calm silence on the way to the game.

At lunch Neil's phone chimed with a text. And he checked it without thinking.

The foxes had stopped for an early lunch, most of them getting burgers and inhaling the food. Andrew sat across from Neil at a two-person table, and when Neil made a broken sound at the number on his phone, Andrew's head shot up.

Andrew already knew what was on Neil's phone screen, just based on the way his head swiveled as if looking for the oncoming threat.

When nothing came for an entire twenty minutes, both of them breathed.

It wasn't until they got back on the bus that Andrew fully relaxed though.

"It was just Riko posturing after all," Neil laughed breathily, "The bitch."

Neil put an emphasis on the word bitch, and he swore he saw Andrew's lips quirk up just a bit.

Kevin and Jean stayed up with the upperclassmen, both of them going on about the night's opponent. Nicky and Aaron had stayed with them, meaning that it was just Andrew and Neil in the back of the bus.

Neil's sure any normal people would take that as a chance to fool around, but Neil took it as a moment to stare. He sat sideways in the seat and leaned his head against the backrest as he stared at Andrew.

Andrew didn't mention anything about Neil's staring. And so Neil looked his fill.

The sunlight dancing through the window made Andrew glow in a way that left Neil breathless. Neil's favorite time to stare at Andrew was when the blonde was framed by light.

Andrew only tolerated it for so long, before turning to Neil with an unimpressed look.

"Staring," Andrew said.

"Can't help it," Neil responds, "You're kind of hot."

Andrew pushes Neil's face away so that Neil almost falls off the seat, but Andrew still keeps a hold on Neil's shirt to keep him from actually falling.

They bicker and talk on and off for a while before Wymack stops the bus again. The foxes all exit the bus for another bathroom break. But Neil and Andrew stay in their seat.

Wymack raises an eyebrow at them before pointing, "No fucking on the bus."

"Outside your paygrade," Neil and Andrew say together.

Wymack's eyebrow twitches, "Not when it's *my* fucking bus."

Neil and Andrew just stared over the seat in front of them at Wymack until the man left with a huff.

"I'm honestly surprised he figured it out before me," Neil said quietly.

Andrew slowly panned over to Neil, a very unimpressed look on his face, "Seth figured it out before you. Seth."

Neil frowned petulantly, "Nicky hasn't... Aaron hasn't."

"Allison, Matt, Renee, Jean, Kevin, Betsy, Seth, Wymack, and Abby have all figured it out." Andrew said deadpanning.

Neil frowned, "But only seven knew before I did."

"That's only subtracting two," Andrew throws out. His voice making it very clear what he thought Neil's intelligence level was.

"Shut up," Neil says, he definitely wasn't pouting. "You're the one who's morosexual. You can't blame me for your low standards."

"I hate you," Andrew responded.

Neil just grinned.

They fell into relative silence, and Neil breathed. Andrew was the one to break the silence.

"Are you sure it's over?" Andrew asked, Neil knew he meant the countdown. But Neil didn't know the answer to the question for sure.

"I think so," Neil says, " But if it isn't, and Riko sends something else. Then you protect Jean and Kevin. I'll come back, I swear."

"Unless it's your father," Andrew says.

"It's not." Neil responds.

But for some reason, Neil's words tasted like famous last words on his tongue.

The Binghamton Campus was decked out in its school colors for the night's game. And the parking lot was swarming with people. Police were everywhere, directing traffic and making sure alcohol consumption was safe.

Everyone was already expecting another win from the Bearcats tonight, they had beaten the Tornadoes the week prior six to seven. But the foxes weren't scared. They had beaten Nevada as well, and they had Nicky on the court with them that night yet again.

Guards opened the gate so Abby could drive in closer to the stadium, and she parked next to the bearcats' busses.

Neil sat with Seth and Kevin, going over plans for the night. Kevin and Neil still hadn't made up from their previous fight. But Kevin had been more tolerable since he'd started his sessions with Betsy.

More often than not, Kevin could be found with some kind of stress ball or slinky. And Neil wasn't surprised to see Kevin playing with a spinning toy while going over the lineup.

Neil didn't know what the toys were for, but they seemed to be helping.

Amidst the hubbub, Andrew could be found with his back against the lockers. His gaze was set on Neil. Despite everything, and the nerves running through Neil's system, Andrew's steadiness and apathy is what grounded Neil to the present.

He just needed to survive this game.

The game started out brutal. And continued to be so. Neil almost got carded a few times. And when halftime came, Wymack reamed him out for being so aggressive.

The rest of the team, however, gave Neil a thumbs up despite Abby's glared protests.

They were two points behind, and about to come face to face with a new lineup. It made Neil's stomach twist just thinking about it. Technically the foxes didn't need to win the game, if they scored three points they would advance to the next round.

But Neil wanted to win. He had told the foxes at the fall banquet they would win. And the eyes of the Exy world were watching them now. People who had thought so low of the fox team, were starting to see what Palmetto was made of.

Neil didn't want that to end tonight.

Neil stepped out of the lineup to go back on the court, and stepped up to Andrew who was staring in interest as Neil approached.

"Can I give you a number?" Neil asked, calling back to the first full game Andrew had played while on medication.

Based on the glint in Andrew's eye, he remembered the night with perfect clarity.

"What will I get in return?" Andrew asks simply.

Neil knows Andrew understands exactly which number Neil will ask for.

"Give me a number as well," Neil says grinning. "I promise to make this entertaining."

By now the team is watching, some of them wary as Neil hooks his fingers in the guard on Andrew's helmet.

"Give me four," Andrew says.

Neil grins, "Give me zero."

Neil didn't often bring out his fun maneuvers. If you used them too many times, the opposing players got smart and figured out how to combat it. But it was moments like these where Neil pulled them out. They were utterly shocking, but once they were done you couldn't pull them again.

"It's time for some Nathaniel maneuvers," Neil grins.

Jean pales, "Oh God not again."

Neil ignored him, because it was already time to head out to the court.

The buzzer went off, and Neil grinned.

Andrew was the first of the two of them to start his side of the deal, a mighty save sending the ball up court. Neil ran for it.

He caught it in his net and passed it directly through his mark's legs and into the goal, lighting it up red.

His mark paused mid-run. Looking down between his legs like the gap could unlock the secrets of the universe. When his backliner mark looked back up, nothing but frustrated anger showed on his face.

Neil ignored the, now angry, backliner and pointed to Andrew with a wide grin.

Andrew sent back the middle finger. And Neil did the two finger salute right back.

Andrew began talking and shouting to his backliners. Aaron and Matt were listening intently to Andrew's commands.

The next time Neil had the ball, he pulled the move he had against Gorilla his first game with the foxes.

He popped the ball up into the air, threw his racket, and slid between the backliners legs before catching his racquet, then the ball in one fluid motion before scoring.

Neil pointed again to Andrew. Holding up two fingers.

That was two.

His backliner mark was getting more and more steadily irritated.

Andrew made several saves before the ball made it back up to Neil again. This time Neil was caught between the wall and his mark.

Neil rebounded the ball to Seth before diving out of the way. Neil's mark slammed into the wall, and after Neil had dropped his mark, Seth sent the ball back for one a clear shot on goal from Neil.

Andrew was playing like he'd never played before, and Neil could see the foxes in utter awe of the sight.

The last time Neil got the ball, he sent a quick grin at Jean as he caught it.

Neil's backliner mark was charging at Neil head on. So Neil charged back. Neil passed the ball to his mark, and in a brilliant display of idiocy the man caught it. And then Neil checked him.

Neil's mark went sprawling, and Neil managed to stay on his feet and picked up the ball. His mark lost, Neil had a clear shot on goal. And he took it. The goal lit up red, but the stadium was exploding with noise and sounds of protest mixed with cheers.

Neil grins as the refs blow the whistle.

They convene at the center court, and the conference with each other. They've all got the rulebook open in their hands.

At some point the two teams take the pause in play to get water.

"Neil!" Nicky groans, "Your maneuver literally just halted the entire game."

The refs were still conferencing, and Wymack's eye was twitching.

"Wesninski," Wymack's voice is dangerous, "I swear to Christ if you got a red—"

"He won't," Jean said bitterly, "It's a completely fucking legal maneuver. But it's fucking stupid."

"It only works once," Neil said, "Then they get smart and wise up."

"You've done it against me more than once!" Jean snarled.

"Sounds like a personal problem," Neil responded.

Jean glared.

Andrew sidled up next to Neil and Neil grinned at him.

"Did I make it interesting enough?" Neil asked with a grin.

Andrew's eyes slid over to Neil.

"You put a hold on the game for eleven minutes," Andrew said. "I suppose that passes."

Eventually a ref walked out to the center and claimed the check to be a legal maneuver. Albeit a very backhanded one.

After that the game became even more violent than before. Borderline illegal checks occurred across the board.

But Andrew kept his promise of keeping the goal locked down, and the foxes won.

Neil doesn't know who started it, but as soon as the game ended, a brawl broke out on the court. Kevin tried to join, but Neil grabbed his jersey to keep him from joining the fray.

The fight was forcibly broken up, and the post-game handshake was skipped.

Neil and Dan were chosen for press duty that night, so Neil watched as the rest of the team left to shower and get ready to head home.

Luckily for Wymack, Dan handled most of the questions, and the questions everyone asked Neil were mainly about different areas of the game. No one even asked about his Nathaniel maneuvers, which was disappointing.

Dan gave Neil a side hug as they walked away from the reporter's. A giant grin was on her face.

Neil allowed the warmth of the shower water to wash away the aches and pains that followed the game. His mind wandering as he massaged out the tension in his neck.

He was almost finished when his phone rang. At first Neil rolled his eyes, thinking it was one of his teammates telling him to hurry up.

It wasn't.

"Junior!" A female voice cut through the receiver. And Neil felt like he should know it. He did recognize the childhood Nickname though.

"Who is this?" Neil asked, annoyed.

Whoever it was, was getting on his nerves.

There was a loud laugh from the other side of the phone. A cackle really.

"I'm offended Junior," The woman let out a maniacal giggle. "I thought you would remember *me* . I was your favorite teacher afterall."

Neil's world upended all at once.

Lola Malcolm.

Neil had been so sure it wasn't his father or his father's men. Neil had been damn near certain.

"Didn't you hear Junior?" Lola continued on, then there was the sound of a hand slapping a forehead, "Oh wait! That's right! The people in charge of warning you forgot to do so! You'd be surprised how forgetful money can make people!"

Neil's chest was twisting, his mind flailing.

"Your father is getting out of prison today Nathaniel!" Lola said, "It's been very hush hush, by order of the feds. But Nathan still wants to see his son."

Neil's mouth opened and closed around a thousand different words he could say.

"It's time to go Junior," Lola said, and Neil could hear the grin in her voice. "Jackson and Romero are with your team. I'm sure you understand what happens if they get too bored."

Neil went to respond, but the line already clicked shut. And so Neil was left standing in the shower, scared and wet.

Neil's hands shook as he pulled on his clothes. There was no running from this. He was too well known to hide. But he didn't doubt that Lola could easily make him disappear.

Lola Malcolm was a crazy ass bitch. But she was an asset to Neil's father. The woman was disguised as his father's personal secretary, but she specialized in the disposal of bodies. Never had a single body she trashed been found.

Her brother Romero could be found with her often, and where Romero went, Jackson also could be found.

Neil didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he couldn't leave without saying goodbye. Knew he couldn't leave without seeing Andrew one more time.

Neil ignored Nicky's words when he entered the locker room. Andrew was in the corner, flipping one of Neil's knives in his hands.

Neil was off suicide watch, but privately he'd asked Andrew to hold onto his knives. He hadn't felt ready to have them back yet.

He wished now that he had.

Neil strode up until he was in front of Andrew and Andrew put his knives away. Giving his full attention to Neil.

Neil didn't know what to say, didn't know how to say goodbye. There were thousands of words that Andrew deserved to hear, but they all felt meaningless on Neil's tongue.

Something must have shown on Neil's face because Andrew tensed.

"Yes or no?" Neil finally asked quietly.

His voice was cracking, but luckily the rest of the team was too busy celebrating to notice Neil's sadness.

Andrew wasn't.

Neil didn't think Andrew would say yes to such a public display of affection. But Andrew surprised him.

Andrew's brow raised but he responded with, "Yes."

Neil kissed Andrew. It wasn't like their other kisses. It wasn't passionate and world stopping.

It was a heartbreaking goodbye to everything Neil had built with the foxes.

It was an apology.

It was a plea to not be forgotten.

It was a broken cry for help that Neil couldn't even accept.

A cryptic goodbye.

"Thank you," Neil whispered the words against Andrew's lips, "You were amazing."

Andrew's hands tightened in their grip on Neil's hair, and Neil could see Andrew's jaw clench.

Then Neil is yanked back into a searing kiss, and Andrew's hands dip under his shirt and behind his jacket.

Neil didn't understand what was going on until cold metal clipped onto the waistband of his shorts. The entire exchange had been hidden by Neil's warm up jacket.

Andrew pulled back and Neil could finally see something in that apathetic gaze, something clearer than anything else in the room.

Come back.

Neil wanted to cry. Because as much as he wanted to promise Andrew that he could make it out of this. Neil wasn't certain he could.

A throat clearing startled both of them.

The foxes all stood around, in varying levels of shock.

"So," Seth said, " You've just settled at least five bets. But... uh... you know what... good for you."

Seth's hands flew up in a "I'm minding my own business" gesture.

Neil would have laughed at the looks on their faces, if not for the utter terror that filled his veins.

When they left, Andrew grabbed tight to Neil's wrist and didn't let go. Neil had made Andrew swear to let Neil handle this. Had told Andrew to protect Jean and Kevin. But still Andrew grabbed hold of Neil's wrist.

They were led outside, where the entire crowd of people attempting to get home was stationed.

Neil could hear angry shouts in the crowd. There were things getting thrown. A beer bottle hit Aaron, and the Minyard cursed out a string of expletives. A cooler was thrown, and the crowd descended into chaos.

The crowd converged, and as soon as it had. Neil felt himself get ripped from Andrew's grasp. He was tugged through the crowd quickly. But the last image he ever had of the foxes, would be Andrew's terrified expression as Neil disappeared. Andrew's eyes were wide as he searched the crowd for Neil.

Neil hoped that expression never crossed Andrew's face again. And he hated that he was the reason it was there in the first place.

Neil dropped his bag. Putting his keys in the netted pocket, and managing to slip his knife into the side of his shoe to better conceal it all in one go. He breathed when the knife was better hidden.

Romero Malcolm dragged Neil with no regards to Neil's safety, which didn't surprise Neil in the slightest. Neil's feet hit the asphalt and he began to struggle against Romero's grip. Then he stopped when a gun was trained on his back. The barrel of the gun was cold, and Neil could feel it through his shirt.

"My team will look for me!" Neil said. Even if they had a gun pointed to his back, Neil would run his mouth until the moment he fucking died.

"Your team is going to be in and out of ERs for a little while," Romero responded. "And I made sure that your little boyfriend was knocked out in the riot. It will be a while before anyone cares enough to look for you."

Neil's breath caught in his throat. He thought of Andrew being trampled underneath the feet of angry Exy fans.

No. No. Andrew would be okay. Renee wouldn't let anything happen to Andrew. She would be there in seconds to back Andrew up.

Neil was shoved into the back of a highway patrol car.

Lola was waiting for him in the backseat. Neil wondered if he could just stab her now, but the gun trained on the back of his head told him that that wasn't an option.

Lola's grin was wide and worse than Riko's. And even though before he wouldn't have been able to recollect her face without horns and terrifying teeth, Neil knew it was Lola the moment he laid his eyes on her.

"You're all grown up Junior!" Lola said cackling, "Supposed to be a future Olympic star. Your father would be so proud... except... he's not... it seems his boy has also grown up to be a little backstabbing whore."

There was nowhere to flinch back, so when Lola grabbed him by the chin and pulled him in close, he had no choice but to obey.

"You know what daddy does to backstabbing little whores don't you?" Lola asked. Her breath smelled like bubblegum. And Neil wanted to flinch away from the smell.

"He's got a boyfriend now," Romero speaks.

Neil wished that he hadn't kissed Andrew now. He hadn't been thinking about the danger it would put Andrew in when he'd done it. He'd only been thinking about how he wanted to kiss Andrew one last time.

Lola smiles wider, and Neil swears he hears the skin stretching. "A boyfriend? Why didn't you tell us Junior? We could have brought him home to meet the parents? Or well... parent... after all... Mommy is dead isn't she."

Neil holds a steady glare on Lola's face, and the bitch cackles in response.

"Did you tell them anything?" Romero asks.

Neil had told the foxes a lot of things. But he knew better than to say so.

"No," Neil said. It was the best lie he'd ever told, "Why would I endanger them like that."

"And yet you kissed one," Romero grinned. "Has he bent you over too."

Lola cackled, and Neil clamped his eyes shut, trying to block out their words.

"Your daddy wasn't too happy when you slept with his boss to put him in prison." Lola said, She forces Neil's knees apart and traces a knife up around Neil's groin. "It was rather low Nathaniel. Did you at least enjoy yourself?"

Neil didn't respond. He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the dashboard, and tried to ignore where Lola had her knife.

"Whores get knives shoved up their ass," Lola whispered. And Neil swallowed hard, "And what else Nathaniel?"

Neil didn't want to respond.

Lola did it for him. "Castration Nathaniel. Are you ready for that? Your daddy is so excited to cut you apart piece by piece. Speaking of which, let me tell you what I'm going to do with all of you once you've been cut apart!" Lola swung her leg over Neil's lap, and whispered into Neil's ear every little thing she planned to do.

Neil clamped his eyes shut, and tried to ignore her words.

It took three hours to reach Maryland. And that was with the 90 miles an hour that Romero took the interstate.

Two miles into Maryland, the switched cars. A gun went to Neil's back again, and he was shoved into the passenger seat, and handcuffed. The seat was pushed back so that he was lying down, and Lola got into the back. The grin still wide on her face.

Neil tested his range of movement a bit. But stopped when Lola teased his fingers with a knife. Neil clenched his fists, but it was futile. Lola simply giggled and pushed down on Neil's pressure points, forcing Neil to relax his grip.

She began making thin lines on Neil's hands. Neil grit his teeth.

He'd dealt with knives before. The pain was nothing.

There was a chime and Romero reached into Neil's pocket and pulled out Neil's phone. Neil had forgotten to put it in the bag when he'd left everything else.

Lola took the phone and looked at it.

"How cute!" Lola said, "It's from a girl named Renee. Do you want me to read it Junior?"

Neil didn't. Neil didn't want to hear what the foxes were messaging him. Lola spoke anyway.

"From Renee. Neil, we are all very worried... oh how sweet... Andrew just woke up on the bus and is trying to come looking for you... Hurry back!"

Neil kept his eyes clenched shut, a shaky breath exited his lips. He tried to push away the mental image of Andrew's terrified expression when they'd been separated, but he couldn't.

Lola cackled. "Andrew must be the boyfriend then!"

Neil didn't respond. He stayed silent even as the car began to move.

Lola clicked her tongue, apparently getting bored.

"Well if you aren't going to talk to me Junior, then I'm just going to get started on your makeover." Lola said.

Neil didn't care. There was a click on the dashboard. And Neil tensed, but kept his eyes stubbornly shut.

A knife set itself against his cheek, and Neil instinctively moved away from it.

Moments later his eyes shot open, and a scream filled with nothing but pain and agony exited his lips. The dashboard lighter pressed against Neil's number 3 tattoo. And Neil screamed, jerking away from it, only to have his face get cut by the knife in the other direction.

Neil didn't know how long it lasted, but when Lola sat back and proclaimed, "Much better!" Neil's face was already burning with unrelenting agony.

There was a snap of a camera sound and Lola grinned.

"I'm going to send these to your little boyfriend," Lola said proudly.

Neil had to bite back the tears threatening to spill over at the pain.

Lola wasn't done though. Instead Lola cut off Neil's shirt. And after that, things became a blur of agony and pain. Lola made her way across every brand and bite mark. Burning new scars over top of them. Stopping to take pictures every now and then.

Neil could hear her typing things out on his phone, and could hear her giggling at whatever responses she was getting.

Then she began to enquire about what the foxes knew. She burned circles along his arms and hands, cutting lines into his arm with the knife. She laughed at his old suicide scars.

She sent more pictures.

All Neil could see was Andrew's terrified expression from when they were torn apart. It's all Neil could think about.

He had to get back to Andrew. All he knew is that he had to get back.

When Lola finally stopped. Neil hung limply in his restraints. He was in so much pain. He knew he needed a plan, but his mind couldn't formulate anything.

They pulled into a parking lot of a sketchy hotel, and Neil was switched into a different car.

He was switched into the trunk of a cop car with Lola climbing in after him, and was unsurprised when two corrupt cops were the ones driving it.

Lola wrapped himself around Neil and pressed a gun to his head.

The trunk was closed, and Neil felt the car be put into motion.

Lola stroked up and down Neil's chest with long nails, scratching at the burns.

"You always were so pretty," Lola said, rocking her hips slightly.

Neil's skin crawled.

"It's no wonder you became such a whore. Does your boyfriend know how many men you've had inside you. Disgusting."

Neil clenched his eyes shut as Lola hit the mark with her words.

"At least you won't be the only whore in the room anymore," Neil fired back.

The response was a pinch to Neil's side, on a particularly bad burn. He had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out.

The car stopped someplace, and then ten minutes later. It started up again. Sirens blaring.

"Oh no!" Lola faked a gasp, "It seems that there's been a disturbance at your father's house! People who think he's the one who killed his wife."

Neil trembles, "People you paid to create a distraction." Neil bit out.

Lola's grin was wide as she bit his ear.

"Such a smart little whore," Lola said, sucking on Neil's neck. Neil wanted to jab her in the face. But he was still bound.

Neil didn't remember much about his old childhood home or what his father's day job had been outside of the house was big, and his father invested.

Loud sounds echoed outside the car as they drove by the created disturbance. Though the sounds slowly got quieter as they got closer to the house.

Lola kept up with sucking on Neil's burns. Poking at Neil's cuts well after the car stopped. Then Lola's phone chirped and Lola pouted.

"Just when I was getting to the good part," She said, grabbing Neil's groin in a painful grasp.

The toolbox opened, and Neil winced as Lola pulled out a cloth.

"Don't fight," Lola said, " Be a good whore. I'll be sure to tell your boy what a good time you had."

The cloth was pressed against Neil's face and Neil struggled only momentarily, before he gave up and allowed himself to be drugged into unconsciousness.

Chapter 47

Neil awoke, and his body was screaming in agony. His mind took a second to catch up and remember where he was. And when he finally recalled, he wished he hadn't.

Neil looked around and blanched when he realized where he was. The basement to his old family home in Baltimore. The cold concrete under him was a discomfort. Neil groaned again, and finally managed to sit up, despite the screaming agony.

There was a dark giggle from somewhere in the room, and Neil instantly recognized it as Lola.

"Your boyfriend thinks you're dead," Lola says, a cruel smile twisting on her face. "A bit of glue on the eyelids and I managed to send him a picture of your dead body."

Neil reaches a hand up to his face and wipes away the remaining residue that was apparently glue. His hand burns at the contact. But Neil manages only a slight wince.

Then Lola's words sink in.

"Fuck you," Neil spits vehmonously.

Lola grins.

"He's threatened to kill me at least 20 times since I sent that picture," Lola says, "I told him he should come visit and meet the family."

"Fuck you!" Neil says even more angrily. He learns quickly that the burns on his throat hurt when he speaks.

"He didn't seem to enjoy the pictures I sent him either," Lola says pretending to be glum, "I wouldn't either though. You're a bit of an eyesore without a shirt."

Neil bites his lip to keep from talking again. Instead he stands slowly and makes his way over to the sink. A sink frequently used for cleaning the blood off of people's hands. He runs the cold water, and sticks his arms underneath. He uses soap, and since it causes more pain.

"I can tell when someone's lost hope though," Lola says with a grin, "He's stopped asking where you are. Maybe I'll send him your head, so he'll remember you always."

Neil swallowed and tried to ignore that mental image.

He felt a certain amount of hopelessness as he finally finished cleaning the burns on his arms and hands.

What was the point?

He was about to die.

After everything he'd done. How far he'd come. After all the sessions with Betsy. After all the kisses with Andrew. He was going to die in the same place he was always going to. On a dirty floor, with no one who cared about him. He would die a failure.

Neil stared at his shoes and thought of Andrew. He thought of his last kiss with Andrew. He thought of the panic and fear that had been in Andrew's eyes. He thought of the knife that Andrew had put in Neil's waistband.

He knew Andrew wanted him to fight. He wondered what Andrew had thought when Lola sent him a picture of Neil's "corpse".

Neil heard a shift as Lola got up and walked over to him.

"Missing your boy Junior?" Lola asked. She nipped at Neil's ear, "I can make you forget about him."

This was what Neil was wasn't it? Whether he wanted it or not, he was a puppet for them to play with.

"Come on Nathaniel, this isn't fun when you don't play."

Neil was nothing more than a toy.

"Junior, haven't you ever been with a woman?"

It didn't matter what he wanted. Because in the end, he didn't get what he wanted anyways. He might not have deserved the hand he was dealt, but fuck, since when did that matter in what he got.

He didn't get to keep Andrew.

He didn't get to keep the foxes.

He didn't even get the dignity of killing himself instead of being tortured to death.

There was the knife in his boot he could slice his neck with. He could do it fast.

Except he'd promised Andrew—

But he hadn't. He hadn't promised Andrew anything this time around. He'd told Andrew what would happen if he was taken by his father. Neil hadn't thought it would happen. But Neil had told Andrew.

He held no promises to return to anyone. He'd promised no one that he would make it through this alive.

He'd made no promises of any kind.

Lola grabs Neil's groin through his pants, while still biting his ear.

So why did Neil feel so sick over this fate? He'd known for a long time that this was how it ended.

Neil shifted forwards, sticking both hands in the sides of his sneakers. It caused the burns on his hands to become aggravated, but Lola didn't notice it.

Why did Neil *need* to get back?

What was the point?

Lola bit at the burns on his neck. She'd burned away the marks Proust had left. But her marks weren't much better.

Logically Neil knew the answer to the question he'd been pondering over. It was right there, something he'd been circling around for a long time.

Neil's hand gripped around the blade inside his shoe.

He had made a promise. But the promise hadn't been to just anyone.

Lola climbed into Neil's lap, and tilted his head up towards her .

The promise had been to ***himself***.

A promise to himself because he had people he wanted to live for.

People who cared.

A family.

Neil yanked the knife out of his boot, flipped it open, and jabbed it hard through Lola's windpipe.

Lola hadn't been expecting it, and she choked around the blade, grabbing at the now slippery handle desperately.

"Fuck you." Neil said anger tight in every bit of his expression.

Neil doesn't yank the blade free until Lola's eyes go blank. Blood coats the grip, and Neil wipes it away best he can on his shorts.

Neil searches Lola's pockets, and finds another knife. He finds his phone.

Neil pockets both.

A strange sensation thrums through him, and he knows what it is. Knows what to call it.

Adrenaline.

Will to live.

Survival.

Neil almost wants to check his phone. He wants to tell Andrew that he's still fighting to get back home.

But then he hears the door at the top of the stairs swing open, and Neil knows that the moment of truth has come.

Nathan Wesninski and Patrick DiMaccio walked down the stairs. Nathan looks nothing like the monster in Neil's dreams. But somehow that's worse. And Neil remembered DiMaccio too, the man was deathly loyal to Nathan and a force to be reckoned with.

Every inch of Nathaniel wanted to run, hide, or cower. But he stood strong as the two men took in the sight before them.

"I have family I need to be getting back to now," Neil snarls, "I don't have time for impotent cowards."

Nathan's eyes fill with rage, then they flash to amusement.

"You have your mother's mouth," Nathan takes a step forward.

And Neil stands his ground.

"But it would seem that you finally inherited my spine," Nathan said. Nathan gestures to DiMaccio, and the man walks over to a wall with different weapons. "Pity you became a backstabbing little whore."

"My spine was made by me and me alone," Neil spits back, " Step any closer and I'll gut you."

Neil wasn't sure if he could win. He wasn't sure at all. But he had to try.

Yes or no?

He had to try.

I hate you.

He had to *try* .

Then stop acting like you're going to die. And fucking live instead!

"You won't win," Nathan says.

DiMaccio reappears with his father's two weapons of choice. A cleaver and an axe Then DiMaccio advances on Neil.

Neil ducks under DiMaccio's flying fist and sends a knee into the man's stomach. It does very little. And Neil has to dive to get away.

Neil bites his tongue as his burnt upper body hits the ground.

"You come in here," Nathan says, and Neil rolls out of the way of the cleaver that came towards his face, "You kill my assistant."

Neil evades another one of his father's attacks, but gets grabbed by DiMaccio.

Neil sends an elbow back into the man's face, and avoids another swing from his father.

Neil's entire body is screaming as he moves. And part of his mind is pushing him to just give up.

Telling him it wasn't worth it.

Telling him that no one cared.

"You put me in jail, Junior. And you can't even manage to give me a proper hello."

"How about I properly shove a knife in your ass," Neil snarls.

He sees DiMaccio coming and throws Lola's blade without thinking. There's a solid THWACK, as it hits DiMaccio in the center of his chest. Neil doesn't dodge in time when DiMaccio charges, ripping the blade out, and shoving it into Neil's abdomen.

Neil chokes on a gasp. And does the stupid thing of pulling the blade out. Blood. Too much blood.

Neil has to stay standing. He wills himself to stay standing.

He would win this fight. These scars would be from a fight he fucking won.

DiMaccio holds out in a brave attempt. But Neil knew he'd hit the heart. DiMaccio falls to his knees moments later, hand clutched over his chest.

"I'll kill you," Nathan snarls as his watchdog falls.

Neil leaps out of the way, his hand clutched over the stab wound on his stomach. Blood pooled around his fingers.

Neil huffed. He breathed, but his vision was getting blurry.

Nathan stepped closer, swinging his cleaver around. Then he lunged. Nathan had Neil under him and pinned in seconds. And Neil had to use both hands to grapple with the man, keeping the cleaver from hitting him.

Nathan snarled in Neil's face. And Neil felt like a little kid again, fighting a monster he had no hope of beating.

Andrew I'm sorry.

His legs were pinned.

Andrew I gave it everything I had.

He wasn't strong enough. Too much blood loss.

I just want to come home.

Nathan's cleaver was touching Neil's neck.

Let me go. Let me stay with the foxes. Let me stay with Andrew.

Neil thought of Andrew's terrified expression when he'd lost Neil in the riot.

Neil never wanted to see that expression again.

Neil wanted to go home.

A final bout of Adrenaline passed through Neil's veins, and he used it to push Nathan off him and roll them so Neil was on top.

Neil took his knife and shoved it through Nathan's neck.

Nathan choked. And he looked at Neil in shock. Neil's hands shook. They trembled violently.

"I think it's time you see where you put me for most my life," Neil said crying angrily, "I'll see you in fucking hell. I hope the devil makes you his fucking bitch dad."

Neil watches as his father's eyes dim completely. It's silent for a few moments. For a few blissful moments, Neil can breathe.

Then the door at the top of the stairs slams open and people flood down the stairs. All of them holding guns.

Neil points his knife. And he backs himself up against the wall, slipping on something along the way, and crawling back as far as he could.

People stare at him. They point their weapons and Neil snarls.

"Stay back!" Neil shouts, "Stay the fuck away from me or I start fucking people up."

It was just talk. Neil could barely stand. The pain in his arms and upper body was too much. And blood was still pouring heavily from his stab wound as he tried to apply pressure.

"Jesus fuck!" A man's voice says with a British accent, "Put down your weapons can't you see he's not out target!"

Neil watches as a man steps forward out of the clusterfuck of people. He steps towards Neil and Neil presses even further against the wall in terror.

"STAY BACK I SAID!"

The man's hands go up in surrender, and he pauses.

"Kid you're bleeding out," The man says. "My name is Stuart. I can help you."

"No," Neil said breathing hard, "I'd rather die than pay the price for your help!"

Neil presses harder on the wound to his side.

Someone is standing over the bodies Neil made and they are checking pulses.

"They're all dead," A woman says.

Stuart's eyes widen and he glances back to Neil.

"Who are you?" Stuart asks.

Neil breathes heavily when Stuart takes another step, and Neil flails with the knife.

"Take another step and I'll go stabby you fucking bitch!" Neil shouts hysterically.

"Kid—"

"No!" Neil shouts, "I want to get home. I will burn this entire city TO THE FUCKING GROUND to get back to my family. DON'T TEST ME YOU BRITISH FUCK!!!"

"What is your name kid?" Stuart asks.

Neil shakes his head again.

"Let me go now!"

"Kid—"

"I am Nathan Wesninski's son! I can and will fucking gut you like I gutted him!"

There is a silence that settles over the room, and Neil can feel the edges of his vision darkening.

"Get her down here," Stuart growls to a woman next to him.

The woman takes a moment to move but eventually does so.

Neil coughs. And he groans in pain.

"You need a hospital kid—"

"I'm not bending over for payment," Neil snarls, "I will never get fucked again. I'd rather die! I want my family! Let me go now!"

Stuart recoils hard.

"Bloody hell," Someone says, "This is fucked up even for us."

Neil falls forward and takes in a gasp of air.

"I want Andrew," Neil mutters under his breath. "I need Andrew!"

He had fought his battle. But he was tired. And he just needed to be protected. He needed someone to protect him for once.

Neil fell to his side, and breathed heavily as his world began to darken.

And in his last moments of consciousness, he swore he saw a face he'd never see again.

"Mom?" Neil muttered out of breath.

Then his world turned dark.

Chapter 48

Neil woke up to the incessant beeping of a hospital machine, his head pounding.

There was a sharp pain throughout his entire upper body that only got worse whenever he moved. But he could feel the foggiest that came with strong painkillers, so he figured the pain wasn't actually all that bad considering it was dulled. Then the memories hit.

The game.

The phone call.

The kiss.

Lola.

His father.

Killing three people.

The man named Stuart.

One more memory popped into the sequence but Neil brushed it off as a simple hallucination. Something brought about by fear and the threat of death.

Neil takes a deep breath in and the burns on his chest pull and sear as if still melting through his flesh.

He groans and hates how it ends with a weak sounding whimper.

"You aren't going to want to move too much kid," A voice says.

Neil opens his eyes to come face to face with a man. The man was obviously a Fed. His whole posture spoke of unwarranted confidence.

"My name is special agent Browning," the man says. "And this is special agent Towns."

Neil isn't normally one for first impressions, and he was even worse at them when he felt like he'd been thrown into the sun.

"Good for you," Neil says with as much smartass energy as he could muster, "Did you get your secret agent names out of a cereal box? How fucking generic can you get?"

Browning's eye twitches, and Neil counts it as a win.

Towns takes a deep breath, likely trying to push away his anger, before he speaks.

"You were found in your father's house in Baltimore around five hours ago," Towns says, "We brought you here to get patched up."

"My team?" Neil inquires.

"Are in a hotel about 20 minutes from here," Browning says, "We told them they couldn't stay in the hospital when your little midget boyfriend started pulling knives."

"What makes you think he's my boyfriend?" Neil asks.

Lola had said it too, though she had been mocking him and mocking Andrew by that extent. But Neil didn't understand how the Feds had decided to use that term.

Andrew and him weren't a "this", and even if they were, Neil hated the word "boyfriend".

Browning held up Neil's phone in response. "We went through it as evidence," Browning said, "Though the only usable evidence there was the phone conversation Lola had with one Andrew Minyard. The only reason he isn't in cuffs right now is because if I'd gotten something like that last picture sent to me in regards to my spouse, I'd be pulling knives too."

Neil furrows his brows in confusion. And in response, Browning hands Neil the phone. Neil scrolled back to the start of the conversation and began to read. Ignoring the pictures because he didn't want to see the injuries yet.

He's going to have a little family reunion right now. Pity you can't make it.

Fuck you, I'll kill you.

So violent. But Junior here likes that doesn't he.

Where are you taking him

Oh! No. Sorry we will have to schedule a day where you can meet the parents soon.

The messages went on and on, and Neil watched as Andrew's texts slowly became more and more panicked and furious.

Then he got to the last picture sent. It had been taken soon after Neil had been knocked out. Neil's unconscious form was splayed out on the ground. His eyes wide open using a bit of

glue on the eyelids.

Most of Neil's injuries were obstructed in the picture, but the limp form, and dead unfeeling eyes did their job.

He looked dead.

It was a cruel trick. But Neil knew it would forever be engraved into Andrew's mind.

Looks like you'll have to find a new boyfriend. This one has expired and gone bad. Pity we would have loved to have you over for Thanksgiving.

You're lying.

Neil isn't gone.

I can show you the pieces I'm carving him into as we speak. Maybe I can send you his head as a keepsake.

I'll fucking kill you.

Neil wanted to call him. Wanted to tell him he was okay. He had been about to do so but the phone was taken.

"No phone calls in the hospital bed," Browning said, "Doctors said not to stress you. Your boyfriend will be coming here. Towns just left to call them. Meanwhile we have questions. We need to ask you about what happened tonight."

Neil's stomach twists at the thought of recounting the night's events. He wasn't ready. Not while in a room alone with nothing but strangers. Not while every burn still felt so fresh, and the stitches so new.

"Can it wait?" Neil asked.

"Kid—"

"No!" Neil said, "I've been taken away from my family, shoved into three different cars, one of them a trunk, tortured, had to fight for my life while my skin is covered in burns, and I've been stabbed. I am barely holding it together right now. I want my family."

Browning is silent, and he glances over at Towns when the other agent re-enters the room.

Browning sighs, "The Andrew kid. And only the Andrew kid."

Neil nods. Another agent walks in and warns them that Andrew was on his way up, and Browning nods.

"You've got a keeper there Wesninski," The agent winked at him.

Neil blinks at her, "Yeah he's got the best stats on the east coast."

Browning snorts out a laugh, "Now I feel even more sorry for him."

Neil didn't get to respond to that because he could hear someone running down the hospital hallway.

"Didn't you tell him no running," Browning grouched.

The female agent shrugged, "I was busy getting up here to warn you he was on his way up."

"We have phones," Browning glared.

The woman didn't get to respond because the door slammed open. Andrew strode inside like a storm on the horizon and stalked over to Neil. He raised his hands to touch, to hold. But he paused when he saw the amount of bandages covering Neil's torso.

Andrew's hands were shaking. Neil could see the control Andrew held so steady in life slipping away. So he reached for Andrew's hand and when he was given it, he placed it on his jaw. Andrew's fingers pressed against the pulse at Neil's neck, his thumb brushing gently and carefully along the bandages that were on Neil's face.

"We'll give you a bit," The female agent said.

Neil hardly heard her, or the complaint that Browning sent forth. He didn't really notice any of them except for Andrew.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Neil said.

He raised his bandaged hands up to Andrew's face, and was rewarded when Andrew rested his cheek lightly on Neil's palm.

Neil wasn't sure if the burning was from his injuries or the contact he'd been craving since the moment he was kidnapped. Either way Neil didn't care.

Andrew's fingers stroked along his jaw, and up through his hair.

"What happened?" Andrew asked.

The, *I thought you were dead*. Goes unspoken, but not unheard.

"Lola likes messing with people's heads," Neil said, "She glued my eyes open after I was chloroformed. The picture was staged."

Neil watched Andrew's face clench in anger, then Neil watched as the anger became self-hatred.

"Stop that," Neil commands.

Andrew's eyes flicked to Neil's.

"You kept your promise," Neil said, "You've kept your promise since day one."

Andrew's glare turns to ice, "Don't lie to me—"

"I never have!" Neil interrupts, "You protected me against myself, You protected my vulnerabilities, you taught me how to fight for myself!"

"You don't look like you've been protected at all!" Andrew fires back.

"And yet the three people I never thought possible to kill are dead by my own hand and I'm here with you! So I'm saying you did one fucking hell of a job!"

Andrew's eyes snapped to Neil. And Neil chuckles.

"And I already jabbed a knife through Lola's neck," Neil said as he leaned forward and Andrew's forehead rested against his own. "You should have seen her face when she died."

"You didn't take a video?" Andrew asks.

Neil suddenly recalls the conversation he'd had with Andrew after Kathy's show so many months ago.

"So you won't mind if I stick a knife in any of their necks?"

"I'll only mind if you don't show me a video."

Neil grins. "If it makes you feel better, I'm sure the crime scene photos are just as gruesome."

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

Andrew's hands tug Neil's hair, guiding Neil in for a long slow kiss.

It said more words than the two of them ever would. The goodbye kiss he'd given Andrew had been the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. Saying hello again was simple, and Neil felt something in his chest finally loosen as Andrew kissed him.

When they finally pulled apart Neil let his head fall forward onto Andrew's shoulder. Andrew gripped Neil's upper arms to keep him sitting upright.

"I've been fighting for myself all day long," Neil says quietly, "I'm tired."

There is a moment of silence, and then Andrew's hands tighten slightly on Neil's upper arms.

"I'll take it from here," Andrew says.

And Neil knew he would.

Not long after Browning came back for the questions. Neil had scooted over on the bed, and Andrew had made himself comfortable sitting next to Neil.

Neil kept his head on Andrew's shoulder while he answered the questions. Andrew, while still mindful of the burns, had a hand resting on the back of his neck.

Browning eventually finished the questions, but before he left Neil stopped him.

"Do you think you could do me a favor?" Neil asked.

Browning paused in the doorway, and Andrew glanced at Neil in curiosity.

"Can you help me change my name?" Neil asked, "Like legally... I was named after— I don't want to—"

Andrew's grip tightened as Neil's breathing sped up a bit. Neil relaxes into the touch easily.

Browning stares for a moment, before blinking, "Yeah kid. We can change your name."

Browning left the room after that, and Neil fell asleep on Andrew.

He didn't sleep for wrong because the door banged open, startling Neil and waking him up.

Neil winced when he sat up and the burns pulled.

Andrew grabbed Neil by the upper arms and helped him lay back down. It was one of the few places without burns.

Meanwhile Kevin stood in the doorway. His entire body trembled. And Neil had seen the man in a lot of different ways. He'd seen Kevin drunk, angry, upset, sad, afraid.

But he'd never, in all his time of knowing Kevin, seen Kevin like that.

Kevin's entire face was red and his cheeks were a blotchy mess. Meaning that Kevin had been crying. Kevin's hands were shaking, and the look on his face was a mixture between relief and grief.

"I thought you were dead," Kevin chokes out, more tears spill down his face, "I thought you died and our fight would be—"

Kevin's breathing was irregular, and Neil was up and ignoring Andrew's annoyed protests in seconds.

Neil knelt down in front of Kevin and ran a bandaged hand through Kevin's hair.

"I don't like change," Kevin chokes out, "Bee says it's a part of—"

Kevin is trying to speak around his panic attack. Andrew finally moves beside Kevin, placing a hand on the back of Kevin's neck.

"I saw you changing— And you were getting so close to everyone else," Kevin sobbed, "I thought I was going to lose you. I thought you were going to end up tossing me out like Riko did— I thought you finally figured out how worthless I am."

Kevin let out another sob. And a picture begins to click together in Neil's mind.

"You're the one that raised me," Kevin continues, "I didn't want things to change. I didn't want— But then Andrew said you were in Baltimore. And Andrew suddenly said that you were dead. And I—"

Kevin's panic must renew, because after those words he suddenly breathes even more irregularly.

"Calm down," Andrew said.

But Neil knew that wouldn't work. So instead Neil covers Kevin's ears as best as he can, and he pulls Kevin against his chest.

It had been the thing Neil did back at the nest. It had been so long since he'd done it.

It hurt, but it worked. Kevin's body began to relax. Andrew helped pull Kevin back up when all was said and done.

"I'm sorry," Kevin says, "I'm sorry."

Neil finds more truth in the apology than any other one Kevin had ever said.

I don't like change.

It didn't excuse Kevin's words. But the fact that Kevin had admitted it, meant that something had shifted.

"Lots of shit will change," Neil said, grabbing Kevin's face, "But you will always be my brother. *Always*. "

Kevin gave Neil a small shaky smile. But the smile was completely real.

The rest of the foxes came in not long after, and Neil briefly wondered if the purposefully let the two who were the biggest wrecks go first.

Jean wasn't much better than Kevin. His face was blotchy, but it at least looked like he'd managed to pull himself together in the time after finding out Neil was alive.

Seth had to be stopped by Allison from hugging Neil. But Neil suspected that Andrew suddenly popping in front of Neil, expression murderous, might have been a factor as well.

Matt looked like a kicked puppy as he took in the amount of injuries Neil had, a very angry kicked puppy.

"Did you kill them?" Matt asked.

"Threw a knife into one guy's chest. And ran the knife through the other two's neck. Someone else took out the people who weren't in the basement with me," Neil said.

Renee stepped forward at that.

"Your father?" She questioned.

Neil grinned, not even wincing when pain flares in his face.

"It's a good thing you and Andrew taught me how to get unpinned," Neil said.

He didn't complain when Renee darts around Andrew to give Neil a giant hug. She was still cognizant of Neil's injuries though, which is why Neil suspected Andrew let her.

"You are still sparring with Andrew and I from now on," Renee said.

Andrew made a grunt of agreement.

Nicky was held back from hugging Neil by Aaron. And Neil could see that Nicky was a complete wreck. Aaron kept Nicky from turning into a mother hen though. And Neil could see the look of relief on Aaron's face upon seeing Neil alive.

Dan looked like she wanted to hug too, but she must have thought better of it. Either due to Andrew, or maybe the amount of bandages wrapping around Neil's body.

"Glad to have you back... captain," The grin Dan gives is almost watery, "And thank you... for coming back."

The foxes talked a bit longer. Neil stayed out of the bed, not wanting to lay back down now that he was up.

"So are we just going to ignore the elephant in the room?" Allison asked, "You and Andrew settled so many bets in that locker room! What the hell!?"

Neil grins, "Actually that was Andrew handing me a knife."

"Oh my god!" Nicky says, " That sounds so secret agency. Your lover handing you a knife to fight with while they kiss you passionately."

"I killed two people with that knife." Neil said.

"I thought you said it was three." Dan threw out.

"I killed the third one with a different knife."

"And they say romance is dead," Nicky says, shaking his head.

Aaron glares at Andrew whenever the kiss is mentioned. Though Andrew seems too busy watching Neil's face.

Allison asks a few more questions, both of which Neil refuses a response on. But in the end the foxes end up exchanging money for the bet.

Dan, Seth, Renee, and Allison looked incredibly happy with their haul of cash.

Andrew glared at Renee when she pocketed her cash. And Renee grinned at him, before slipping Andrew half secretly as she passed him.

The nurse walked in with Wymack and Abby not long after, and she instantly looked upset.

"You are not supposed to be up," The nurse said, pointing at Neil.

"And yet I am," Neil responded. "Oops."

The nurse's eye twitched, and Neil almost felt bad. Luckily Abby took over feeling bad for him, so Neil went back to not giving a shit.

Wymack gave Neil a once over with an expression that was a mixture of grief, relief, and steady annoyance.

It must have taken pure talent to pull it off. And it made the coach look rather constipated.

Then Wymack's face relaxed, and he sighed, "I'm glad that you're okay kid."

Abby managed to get Neil discharged after that, and Browning said he would come to South Carolina if he needed anything. He also promised to drop by with paperwork for a name change, and told Neil to start thinking about what name he wanted.

Then the foxes were on the bus and headed back to Palmetto. Abby told Neil should would check his injuries at the stadium.

The foxes all ended up in the back with Neil and Andrew, apparently deciding that Neil wasn't to be let out of their sight.

"Well at least that's the last of your near death bullshit," Seth finally said, "I mean there can't be something other than your father attempting to kill you."

Beside him, Andrew tensed.

At the front of the bus, Wymack went silent in his conversation with Abby. And suddenly Abby found the view out the window to be much better.

Neil just felt guilt.

"Actually," Neil said, "It's not."

The foxes all tense, and Neil watches as Jean and Kevin looked towards him terrified.

"I made a deal to get out of the nest after Kengo died. I was in a bad place and it was my only out."

Someone muttered under their breath that "bad place" was a major understatement.

Neil looked to Andrew for help, but Andrew was staring at his clenched fists.

"I made a deal with Ichirou that I would prove my worth as an investment on the court away from Edgar Alllan... I was given one season to win Championships as a fox. Or I—" Neil paused, "Or I would go back to the Nest, be sold into sexual slavery as a bargaining piece, or I would be given back to my father... I decided a while back that given those three options... I would be just ending my own life."

Neil doesn't look up at his team. He can't. He can't see the looks of utter terror on their faces.

"Oh my god," Dan says, "No! You can't just... you can't just— Andrew you can't possibly be okay with this!?"

Andrew's hands fisted on his lap. His jaw clenched.

"Andrew knew," Neil said quietly.

"That's why," Kevin said. Kevin's hands were pressed into his face, "That's why he started trying so hard. That's why you panicked when I said—"

Kevin cuts himself off and hunches over. Jean looks horrified.

"No matter what you and Jean are free at the end of the year," Neil says.

"I don't care if I'm free!" Kevin shouts, "What about– what about you?"

"It's too late to back out of the deal now," Neil says, "I'll have to see it through to the end."

"Who all knew?" Dan asked.

"Wymack, Abby, Betsy, and Andrew." Neil responds, "I believe in us guys. We can do this. And even if we don't, I don't regret a single second of any of this. This has been the best year of my entire life."

There was a moment of silence.

"Well now I'm determined to make you say that about a year where you weren't raped and tortured," Seth said with a smile.

The rest of the foxes nod in agreement.

"I'll either die free, or I'll live free," Neil says, "Either way I owe the freedom to all of you."

There was a tension to the other's shoulders as they smiled at him, but eventually it drained away as they laughed and joked.

Neil bumped his shoulder into Andrew's. "What's my percentage?" Neil grinned.

"You've somehow managed to shoot up to 1000%," Andrew said. "At least your talented at something."

"I've been told I'm also very talented with my mouth," Neil grins. Then he flushes.

Andrew raises an eyebrow.

"I meant that about my smartass comments, not my blow job capabilities," Neil says blushing.

Neil swore he saw Andrew's lips twitch up the tiniest bit.

Abby looked Neil over at the stadium. She slowly took off Neil's bandages and set them to the side. Neil didn't look, didn't want to see. But Abby's intake of breath told him it was bad.

She rubbed burn cream over the burns, and then rewrapped everything.

"You'll need to let those air out eventually. And soap getting in those burns will hurt." Abby says.

Neil nods in his understanding, and allowed Andrew to guide him out to the car. The others were already in their vehicles waiting.

"I'm guessing there isn't a chance of you letting me run back?" Neil asked.

Andrew glared, "Get in the car Wesninski."

The foxes all migrated to Neil and Andrew's room, much to Andrew's obvious displeasure. Andrew looked about ready to send everyone away, but Renee whispered something to him, and the tension left Andrew's shoulders. Even if the blonde's mouth was still clamped firmly shut. Andrew went back to the door and took out his keys, but he paused when he looked at the lock.

He pulled out a knife and shoved open the door. And Neil just barely had time to stop him from throwing a knife at the man standing calmly in the room.

Stuart stood calmly in the middle of the room, a nice suit framing him nicely. He on the older side of age, but yet he still held himself as if he was a young man. A young fighter.

His hands were stuffed into his pockets as he gave Neil a once over.

"I don't know why the hell you saved me," Neil said, "And I don't know who the hell you are. But consider us even. I stopped Andrew from throwing a knife through your neck just now. Now just leave."

"Kid—"

"No I know you aren't a Fed," Neil said, "You stand like a gangster. I don't trust shit any of you people say, and I won't be indebted to any more of you. Leave. Now."

Stuart huffs, "Bloody hell, you are just like you're damn mother."

Those words had Neil pause. His next words of objection caught in his throat. Beside him, Andrew flipped the knife in his hand. But Andrew waited. He let Neil take the lead with the talking. The other foxes were gathered around in the doorway, but they were silent as well. Either they were still getting over the shock of seeing some random guy. Or they were following Andrew's lead and allowing Neil to figure out what was going on himself.

"You knew my mother?" Neil asked.

"I'm her damn brother," Stuart said. "My name is Stuart Hatford. And *you* , Nathaniel Wesninski—"

"Neil," Andrew corrected.

Stuart shot Andrew a glance and grit his teeth before correcting himself , " *Neil* . You were supposedly dead," Stuart says.

Neil barks out a laugh, it's a bitter cold thing, " Well you need to either get better sources, or a better assassin because one or both of them failed."

Stuart looked like he'd been slapped, "Neil I don't want you dead. I'm bloody thrilled to see you alive. I thought we lost you all those years ago when you were caught by your dad."

"I thought gangsters had better Intel than that," Neil fired back, "I wasn't dead, I was sent to hell on Earth. Formally known as Evermore."

Stuart winced, "I know that now."

"Great," Neil said, " Now leave."

Andrew stepped forward to force the man out if he had to. But Stuart held up a finger.

"Tell your boyfriend to give me a chance here," Start said, " There's some things that need to be explained. And there's someone who owes you one hell of an apology. But first, why don't you sit down."

Neil walks over to the bean bags and sits down, Andrew falls into the same exact one. Andrew's eyes never left Stuart's face.

The foxes filed in as well, and took their places inside the room.

"Do we need the peanut gallery?" Stuart gruffed.

Neil felt suddenly bitter.

"Since they are the family that didn't fucking leave me, yes."

Stuart winced again, and Neil watched as his face fell. The man looked older now.

"I never would have let you stay there if I had known," Stuart said. "But my source was solid and I believed her."

Neil was quiet. Source?

"My source lied to me," Stuart said.

Neil furrowed his eyebrows. And then a voice he never thought he'd hear again filled the room.

"I did what I had to do?" Mary Wesninski's voice was a shock to all of Neil's systems. And he felt every emotion hit him at once..

"Mom?" Neil's voice shook as he said it. Tears filled his eyes.

Andrew's knife fell from his hand, and all of the foxes stared at Neil in a mix of horror.

The words that had been said weren't processed. Neil was trying hard to find the meaning in the words, but his brain kept stumbling over them instead.

Mary Wes— Hatford stared at her son. She was still so very familiar despite the scars that covered her face and arms.

"You're alive?" Neil's voice was shaking. He had the urge to scream and cry. To hug the woman in front of him.

"You never were all the great at finding a pulse," Mary Hatford said.

Neil's hands shook.

"Why didn't you— I was— How?" Neil finally managed.

Andrew's hand found the back of Neil's neck, but it did very little to quell the rise of emotions in Neil's chest.

"You were incorrect when you told your father I was dead," Mary said, "I was close to it. But not yet. I had called Stuart before we were captured, and he got me out of the hole you dug. And then got me to safety. We switched in a fake corpse, and re-covered it with dirt, before leaving."

Mary's voice wasn't the one Neil imagined in his dreams. It wasn't the voice of a woman who cared, or protected him. It was cold and detached. It was survival.

Neil's brain tried to process the information.

"I'm more interested in why you supposedly told Stuart your son was dead!" Allison snapped out.

Neil almost jumped to his mother's defense, because surely she had had her reasons. Surely she had lied to keep him safe. But Mary spoke first, her words just as cold and detached, and they sent a cold shock of ice through Neil's system.

"He was a lost cause. If I'd told Stuart he was alive, then Stuart would have gone to save him from Evermore. I couldn't risk Nathan discovering that I'd survived, I'd have to start running again. It wasn't worth the risk." Mary responded.

Neil stopped breathing. All emotions came to a screeching halt inside his system. He heard the foxes go silent. He saw Andrew's fists tighten.

For years his mother had been the one who had protected him. The only one to love him and think him worth the protection.

But now... but now he was discovering that that fantasy had been nothing but a lie.

"I wasn't worth going back for?" Neil questioned brokenly.

Slowly another emotion seeped into his bones. And it surged forward when Mary spoke.

"Saving you was not worth the risk, no."

Neil's breathing exited him in quick bursts, and he smacked Andrew's hand away when Andrew tried to calm him.

Neil didn't want to be calm.

He wanted to be pissed.

"I'm your son," Neil said. It was still quiet and still timid. But he still felt anger surging through his veins.

"Congratulations," Mary said sarcastically.

Neil felt something inside himself breaking.

"You were supposed to protect me," Neil said.

"And I tried to," Mary fired back.

"YOU LEFT ME!!!" Neil screamed.

Mary's jaw clenched, and Andrew moved to get up but Neil shot him a glare.

This was his fight.

He had every right to finish this fight himself.

Andrew sat back down.

Mary spoke, "You got us caught. It is your own fault. I'm covered in scars because of—"

"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR SHIT ABOUT SCARS!!!" Neil shouted. "I WAS BRANDED WITH THEIR FUCKING NAMES, AND ALL OF THE THINGS THEY CALLED ME!!! I

HATE LOOKING IN THE MIRROR IN THE MORNING BECAUSE I SEE EVERY PLACE THEIR HANDS HAVE TOUCHED!!! YOU GOT TO LIVE IN ENGLAND WITH YOUR FAMILY, AND I KILLED MYSELF TRYING TO PROTECT MINE!!! YOU DON'T GET TO TALK ABOUT FUCKING SCARS!!!"

Neil had angry tears rolling down his face. He'd stood up and his entire body was trembling.

"I can't be blamed for the shit that happened to you at Evermore," Mary said with anger in her eyes. Utter disregard of her son, "You were the one who chose to make yourself a Martyr. You were the one who chose not to run from there. You got us caught! It was your own damn fault!"

Neil reeled back as if he'd been slapped. And he watched as Stuart stepped forward.

"Mary I suggest you shut up before I make your son witness your death a second time," Stuart said angrily.

Neil didn't respond to that. His anger was turning into grief, and then shock, and then back to anger.

Arms encircled him and pulled him into a hug, Andrew's arms were protective and solid. Andrew was safe.

The foxes were crying out in outrage at Mary and Neil let it all fall away while he kept his face buried in Andrew's neck.

"Kid I know I failed you," Stuart says. "But I want to make it right. I heard about the deal you made. We can take you. We can keep you in England where you'll be safe, and alive. It wouldn't be of any cost to you. You wouldn't owe me any favors."

Neil thought about it. For a moment he actually thought about it. But when he thought about the foxes he couldn't even consider it.

The foxes were silent though.

"Do what you have to," Andrew said. Neil detected the slightest shake to his voice.

And Neil shook his head, sobbing "I don't care if this road ends with me dying." Neil said, "I'm staying with the family who never left me behind."

Andrew's arms tightened slightly on Neil's waist.

"If you're not gone by the time he stops crying," Andrew says dangerously, "I'll kill you."

Andrew was the person who chose to protect him, to stay with Neil despite the danger, despite the chances.

"I have a gun—"

"I'll help him," Stuart snarls, cutting off Mary Hatford's smart remark. "Leave."

There was a pause, and then there was the sound of footsteps leaving the room.

Stuart sighed, "I'm proud of you kid. I'm damn happy you're alive. And I'm proud of you. I'll be watching your games. And well... I'm glad he has you."

Neil doesn't know if he meant the foxes or Andrew. But none of them responded.

Footsteps echoed as Stuart left the room, and the door shut.

"No questions," Andrew said. "It's time for bed."

The foxes must have agreed because no one asked any questions. Instead they set up the room so that it was covered in blankets and pillows.

The rest of the foxes had left to pick up more blankets and such, so Neil and Andrew were situating their own place in the nest the foxes had created.

"Can I sleep with my back to you?" Neil asked.

Andrew's eyes snap to Neil.

"You're the only one who's always had it," Neil explains.

Andrew's jaw clenched, "1001% Junkie."

Neil gives a weak smile, and Andrew pulls Neil down to the floor and wraps an arm around Neil's waist. His front pressed against Neil's back.

The rest of the foxes began filing back in. None of them commented on the fact that Andrew was a barrier at Neil's back. Instead they all postponed themselves in a protective circle around Neil.

There was still grief, and outrage at the fact that Mary was still alive. The fact she never even tried.

But Neil found... that he really didn't need her, or the fantasy of her protection anymore.

Instead he allowed himself to sink into the warmth, family, and protection that was found in Andrew and the foxes.

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neil awoke to the foxes moving around the room. Neil felt Andrew's arm still secure around his waist, even as the late morning sunshine peaked through the windows. Neil didn't open his eyes right away, the pain medication had worn away; which left the only borderline agony.

Neil could manage it if he laid still enough, but he also didn't want to deal with the foxes crowding him so early in the morning.

"I feel kind of bad we aren't able to make it out to help your mom move," Dan said.

"It's alright," Renee responded carefully, "She heard what happened on the news and said we should be here."

Neil felt Andrew's thumb rubbing soothingly over a patch of unburned skin. Neil hadn't realized how much he was holding his breath to avoid pulling the burns on his chest until Andrew started his motion. But he did his best afterwards to breathe.

"I might be able to call my mom and see if she'll go and help Stephanie out," Matt said.

"I'm sure your mom would love that," Dan says with a teasing note to her voice.

"Stop trying to set up our mothers Dan," Renee said. But Neil could hear the smile in her voice.

"All I'm saying is that they'd be the ultimate power couple. Think about it. Randy kicks ass with her fists, Stephanie can rule the world with her brain. Brains and Brawns lesbian couple." Dan says.

Neil shifts so that Andrew is closer, letting the sounds fall away around him.

"We'll all be going to brunch," Renee says some time later, the others had gone to get ready for the day. "Will you guys be coming?"

"It will be a minute," Andrew responds, "He won't be moving very quickly."

"We'll wait," Renee responds.

Neil heard Renee leave. And once the door shut, Andrew's hand left Neil's side and went to his hair.

"I know you're awake, Junkie," Andrew said.

"I know," Neil said tiredly.

Andrew helped Neil sit up, and then Andrew took Neil and helped him sit on the toilet before taking off Neil's sweatshirt and unwrapping Neil's bandages. Andrew started with the arms and worked his way up to Neil's face. And he finished with the bandages on Neil's torso.

When the bandages on Neil's chest fell away, Andrew's fingers brushed over Neil's chest. There was a dark look in Andrew's eye, and Neil decided to look down.

For the first time he saw his injuries.

Where before there had been a mass of brands and words, there were now burns. The word ugly was gone. The words unlovable, shut, whore, all of the names. All of the things he'd been called were burned away. Neil's arms were covered in burns and lacerations, as were his

hands. Neil couldn't see his own neck, but he knew Lola took the time to burn away Proust's bites.

The sight filled Neil with a sort of satisfaction. The amount of times he'd prayed for those words to be gone, couldn't be counted. But he'd never believed it would actually happen.

Neil knew what Andrew was staring at though. Knew because he could see the pain and self hatred shining in Andrew's eyes as he stared at it. The emotion was so faint, and Neil was shocked he caught it.

Neil's burned hand rested on Andrew's cheek as Andrew traced the lines of a new name on Neil's chest.

"I'm no longer covered in lies," Neil grinned.

Andrew's hand balled into a fist on Neil's chest, on top of the name Lola carved there.

Andrew

Andrew wouldn't meet his eyes, so Neil put his burnt fingers under Andrew's chin and guided his gaze up.

"You didn't put it there," Neil said, "So stop."

Andrew's jaw clenches.

"Yes or no?" Neil asks.

Andrew's eyes shine with anger and rage, but Neil knows that Andrew won't hurt him.

"My name is on your chest like a brand—"

"But it's not a brand you put there!" Neil says, "We aren't them! You wouldn't hurt me like that!"

Andrew's hand uncurls from its fist.

"And like I said," Neil spoke, "At least this scar won't be a lie."

Andrew's eyes meet Neil's and some of the anger slips away, "You're unbelievable. 1003%."

Neil grins and watches as Andrew leaves. Neil chuckled to himself and removed the rest of his clothes, thinking Andrew had left him to shower.

He was completely nude when an unsuspecting Andrew walked back in with trash bags and a roll of duct tape. Neil watched as Andrew moved quickly to avert his eyes, being aware of Neil's boundaries and the fact Neil had never been fully nude around him.

Neil hesitated before he spoke, ensuring the words he was about to speak were actually the truth. The last thing he wanted was to give a yes when it was really a no.

"You can look," Neil finally decided. Neil crossed his arms over his chest and pressed his legs together tightly. "Just... uh... Don't be disappointed by what you see."

Andrew's gaze was steady on the wall for a moment; then he turned.

Andrew's hand clenched for a moment around the trash bags, the movement only noticeable because of the crinkling sound they made.

Neil carried scars on his thighs and ass, both from himself and from the Ravens. He'd expected Andrew to turn away at the sight, but Andrew just stepped forward with trash bags in hand. Then Andrew began to steadily wrap Neil's torso, neck, forearms, hands, and cheek in trash bags.

"I think we've removed half of what I need to clean in the shower," Neil says with a grin as Andrew secures the plastic on Neil's face.

Andrew glances at Neil, then goes back to what he was working on.

"Hey," Neil said, " Yes or no?"

Andrew secures a last piece of tape before tugging Neil in for a kiss. Neil's hands go to Andrew's hair, but then he pauses and stares at them frowning. The bags were a tiny bit annoying.

Andrew huffs and turns on the shower, testing the temperature and then pushing Neil inside. Neil hears Andrew shuffling around outside the shower, so Neil sets to work on how he's going to shampoo his hair.

The cap on the bottle was proving to be difficult, so Neil took the bottle in trash bagged hands and began trying to beat the bottle open. Finally he got the bottle open but the force he was beating the bottle with meant it exploded into his eye. Neil stumbled back and was caught by Andrew.

Neil kept the eye assaulted with shampoo firmly shut, and watched Andrew with the other one.

Andrew looked very unimpressed.

"You're such a moron." Andrew said, taking the bottle away from Neil, "Did it not occur to you I'd be helping you?"

Neil opened his mouth to speak. Then closes it because that made more sense than Andrew letting Neil fumble around like a monkey opening a coconut. Honestly a monkey probably would have done a better job.

Andrew hauled Neil up, and pulled a chair into the shower. He made Neil sit and tilt his head back, before working the shampoo through Neil's dirty hair.

Neil's sure the hospital cleaned it somewhat. But he's also sure that there was probably blood being cleaned out of his hair.

Neil didn't focus on that though, instead he focused on the half naked man in front of him.

Andrew had stripped off everything except for his boxers. And Neil really hated him for it.

He hated Andrew less when Andrew kissed him.

The angle was awkward and the trashbags made it so Neil couldn't grip onto anything. But Andrew kept him tethered. Neil kissed Andrew's neck, causing the blonde to tug Neil's hair in annoyance as he shivered.

"You and that damn neck thing," Andrew ground out.

"It makes you feel good," Neil said simply, a small smirk on his face. "I like that you like it."

Andrew practically growled and surged forward to kiss Neil again. His hands never leave Neil's hair.

"Blowing you," Andrew says, after some time. "Yes or no?"

Neil's breath stuttered, "Yes," He said.

"My hands?" Andrew asked.

Neil thought about it, he carefully thought about it. And there was no hesitation in his voice when he answered.

"Anywhere," Neil breathed.

Andrew paused, glancing at Neil's face. His eyes were slightly wider than normal.

Neil laughed. "Haven't you been wanting to touch my ass since day one? From now on it's a yes until it's a no. Nothing inside me. But touching is a yes with you."

Neil didn't know why Andrew was looking at him for so long. Neil didn't understand the slight tightening of hands in Neil's hair. Not until he thought of the fact that Neil had hidden his body for so long. Asked Andrew not to touch, told Andrew not to look. Neil had only been giving inches up to this point, but now he'd trusted Andrew with an entire mile.

"You're stupid," Andrew ground out.

Neil grinned and put his fingers through Andrew's hair. The wet strands falling through his fingers.

"I've done a lot of stupid things," Neil said, "Trusting you will never be one of them."

Andrew put a hand over Neil's mouth, his jaw was set. But still Neil smiled behind Andrew's hand.

Words left his mind moments later. He had to cover his mouth because he didn't want all of the foxes to know what was happening.

Andrew's hands left Neil's hair and traveled down to Neil's thighs. And Neil hadn't been expecting the rush of exhilaration when Andrew's hands rested places they'd never been before.

Neil almost fell out of the chair when he was finished. He eventually slid out of the chair to rest on the floor next to Andrew.

Neither of them left, Neil didn't feel some awful need to process everything. He didn't need the space. And Andrew didn't move like he needed it either.

Neil could see the bulge in Andrew's boxers and he flushed wildly.

"Do you want help?" Neil asked.

Andrew's head snapped up and he gave Neil a very unimpressed look.

"And how do you plan to do that?" Andrew asked, "In case you haven't noticed you are injured."

Neil frowned in annoyance, "If I can still run my mouth, then I can still use it."

Neil only gets an unimpressed raised eyebrow.

"And my hands aren't that uncoordinated now," Neil continued.

"You sprayed shampoo in your eye," Andrew said.

"Still my mouth is still available." Neil said.

"Your face hurts when you open your mouth to wide." Andrew said.

"Yeah but I mean I wouldn't have to open it that wide would I, I mean your kind of– Oh."

Andrew's dick was by no means the size Neil had been expecting. And it took a second for him to process.

Andrew just stared at Neil, unimpressed, after having shucked off his boxers

"That's just not proportional," Neil said absently.

Neil's sure his eyes were wide. And he looked down at his own lap. "That's not fair... I'm three inches taller than you... what gives?"

"Are you comparing our dick sizes?" Andrew asked. Neil looked up at Andrew's face.

Andrew's mouth quirked slightly.

"It's not midget sized," Neil said.

Andrew scowled. And Neil smiled, kissing the corner of Andrew's mouth.

"If it's not a no," Neil said, "I'd still like to try."

Andrew stared at Neil for a moment. "Ask me again when you get cleared to play," Andrew said.

Neil accepted that, and then Accepted Andrew's kisses as the blonde took himself over the edge, with a sharp gasp against Neil's lips.

Andrew helped Neil out of the trashbags and into some new bandages. Andrew threw one of his shirts at Neil, there was more room in the chest area on Andrew's shirts, so the fabric chaffed less on Neil's burns.

Andrew helped Neil step into a soft pair of shorts, before shoving Neil's sneakers on his feet and tying them. Andrew got dressed after. Pulling on boots instead of sneakers. Andrew tugged Neil in for one more kiss before they joined the others in the parking lot to drive to brunch.

Most of the places on campus were closed for spring break, which meant the foxes had to drive a bit to find a place that was open. They ended up passing Betsy's office, and Neil felt a sudden surge of guilt over the fact that he hadn't thought to call her and say he was alright. Almost as if reading his mind, Andrew spoke.

"She called me last night," Andrew said, "When you were in the hospital. The news broke and she saw it."

"I should have called her," Neil said guiltily.

"And in which crisis yesterday were you able to?" Andrew asked dryly.

"I'll call her before we go in for brunch," Neil said.

Andrew didn't respond but reached into his pocket and pulled out Neil's phone. Neil hadn't even realized he'd left it behind.

Aaron and Nicky were the only two in the car. But both stayed silent during the exchange, although Nicky made a quiet squeal that had Andrew tensing and gripping the wheel tighter at.

Neil called Betsy when they got to the restaurant. Betsy picked up the phone almost immediately.

"Neil, I am so glad you are okay!" Betsy said, "I was so worried when the news said that you'd been taken!"

Neil felt emotionally drained as he finally heard Betsy's voice. The past few months had been nothing but crisis after crisis, healing, exhausting fights with his own brain and demons. And it finally felt calm in the waves of panic and fear. Neil knew it would be back, he still had one more crisis on the horizon to deal with. But he let himself relax back into Andrew as the blonde lit a cigarette.

Andrew's arm was protectively crossed over Neil's chest.

"I have a lot to tell you about," Neil said shakily, "God everything is so fucked, but at the same time it's all so amazing."

Neil could feel certain aspects of his life being torn down around him. But at the same time he felt secure and safe while wrapped in Andrew's arms.

"We can plan to meet today," Betsy suggests, "I will be hanging around the court with David and Abby today. You can stop by."

Neil smiles, "I'll do that! Thank you."

Neil and Betsy hang up. Then Andrew and Neil go inside.

The rest of the foxes were already laughing at the table. Seth and Nicky were building a card tower out of sugar packets, and Matt was laughing every time they couldn't make it past the third level.

Nicky noticed Neil and Andrew walking in and grinned.

"Did you call Betsy?" Nicky asked.

Neil nodded and sat down, wincing at the pull on his burns. Andrew sat down next to him, his thigh pressing against Neil's leg.

The upperclassmen talked and laughed. Jean pulled Neil into their usual banter, and to Neil's surprise, Kevin joined in as well.

"Pass the salt Jean."

"Why? You are already a salty bitch."

"Didn't realize you've finally got a mirror, what's self reflection like."

"You both act like children."

"Kevin, weren't you the one struggling with a puzzle cube the other day?"

"Neil, weren't you the one who chucked a puzzle cube out your math teacher's window during class because you couldn't solve it."

"Renee has betrayed me, therefore my best friend slot is now reopened. Any applications?"

"Oh! Me!"

"Matt, you are already my best friend."

The banter went on until the server took their orders, her face turned horrified when she turned to take Neil's.

"Hi," Neil said, "I'd like the yogurt parfait—"

"Sweetie your face!"

"I've been told it's quite interesting, can I get the yogurt parfait?"

"Are you alright?"

"Yogurt. Parfait... Extra strawberries."

The server stared at Neil open mouthed, and then looked at the rest of the table.

The rest of the foxes did nothing to help. Allison was laughing against Seth's shoulder while Seth was trying to hold back his laughter by drinking his water.

Aaron was covering a smile with his hand while Nicky giggled next to him. Renee was smiling in amusement. And Dan and Matt were openly laughing, not even trying to hide it.

Andrew was watching the exchange. To anyone else it would seem like he was bored, but Neil had been decoding Andrew for the last year now, he was the master at Andrew-expressionism. Andrew's eyes glimmered in interest, and there was a small turn up of his lips. It still looked like he was bored, the small upturn wasn't even really a smile. But it was enough to tell Neil that Andrew was amused.

"What happened?" The server asked, worried.

Neil forced his expression to darken, "I didn't get my yogurt parfait."

The server practically sprinted from the table after that, leaving the foxes reeling with laughter. Andrew took a drink of his water, but Neil could see even more of an upturn on Andrew's lips.

Eventually the foxes calmed enough to start talking about plans for their interrupted spring break. Neil hadn't thought the plans were involving him, so he stole one of his knives from Andrew and began flipping it.

"Jesus the two of you are like murder boyfriends," Nicky muttered.

A knife flew by Nicky's face, and Nicky yelped.

"Yup okay! Shutting up now!" Nicky said.

Neil stared sadly at his now empty hands.

"I was using that," Neil glared at Andrew.

Andrew stared at Neil for a moment, before getting up, grabbing the knife and plopping it back in Neil's lap.

Seth made the sound of a whip cracking, Neil didn't get it, but Andrew reached for the knife again. Neil whacked him on the head with a napkin.

"I'm using it," Neil glared.

So Andrew sunk down and kicked the chair out from under Seth, and that ended that.

"How about we ask Neil what his plans were then?" Dan said, the use of his name had Neil looking up again.

Everyone glanced at Neil, like they were expecting him to be a good listener.

"What were your plans for spring break?" Renee finally supplied when it became clear Neil wasn't sure how to answer.

Neil just shrugged, "I wanted to go on a vacation somewhere. I've... uh... never been many places other than where I was on that year on the run, not that I remember much of those, and Evermore. We left Evermore for press and stuff like that, but I've never—"

Neil paused and then looked at his hands. The foxes were all in varying stages of disbelief.

"We took vacations," Kevin said, "What about that one trip to the beach we did for a photoshoot. You didn't even have to do photos yet at that time."

"I had to keep Riko out of your room at night somehow," Neil smiled wryly, "And uh... the camera man took interest in me."

Kevin's mouth opened slightly, then Kevin closed it and stared at his water.

Andrew put a hand on Neil's thigh, it brought Neil back. And Neil brushed a bandaged hand over Andrew's hand in thanks.

"So no beach," Dan said, clearing her throat.

"What about a resort?" Matt asked.

"Riko took the Ravens—"

Allison cut Jean off, "So no resort. What about a cabin?"

Allison raises an eye at Neil, "Blue Ridge?" Allison asked.

Neil shrugged, "I don't know what that is."

Allison huffed out a breath and shook her head before pulling out her phone and calling someone.

Neil started kicking Jean under the table to get a rise out of him, and it was working. It worked probably too well, considering the pancake Jean threw at Neil.

Moments later Allison hung up the phone, and Neil maybe "accidentally" spilled Jean's water onto the backliners lap. Definitely not on purpose.

"We got a cabin at Blue Ridge that will sleep Eleven," Allison said. She leaned into Seth slightly, "I say we should head out after brunch and get up there."

Neil glanced at Allison in shock, "Are you sure that's okay? I mean—"

Allison waved her hand around, "Shut up sweetie, let me do nice things for you."

Neil's mouth snapped shut at that.

"Do you need us to pay you?" Renee asked Allison.

Allison just waved Renee off, "I've got it."

The foxes start chattering excitedly. And Dan starts making plans to pack and head out immediately.

"I need to see Betsy and Abby at the court before we go," Neil says.

Dan pauses, then smiles. "It's no rush. We can wait. You head to the court and figure everything out. I'm sure Andrew can handle packing your stuff."

"I'll need to go to the court as well," Kevin says, "I... uh... want to talk to Wymack about a way we can handle the press."

"I can drive them," Jean says.

Andrew's hand tightens on Neil's knee, and Neil realizes it would be the first time they'd been separated since reconvening at the hospital. Neil soothes a thumb over Andrew's hand.

"I shouldn't be long," Neil says.

When leaving brunch, Andrew slips Neil's knife into Neil's back pocket.

"You aren't walking around without one when I'm not with you," Andrew says in response to Neil's questioning gaze.

Neil took a moment to admire the fact that he was being allowed sharp objects without supervision. He never thought he'd get to that moment.

Jean pushed Neil and Kevin into his car and drove off to the court. The drive was short, and when they went inside, Neil noticed that Betsy and Abby weren't there yet.

Kevin wandered off to Wymack's office and Neil waited with Jean.

"I was worried," Jean said suddenly. "At first I thought you were just injured in the crowd, and I was worried. But then Andrew suddenly started shouting about your father and I was downright terrified."

There was a shake to Jean's voice.

"You raised Kevin and I," Jean said, "No one asked you to. We weren't expecting it. But you did."

"Someone had to make sure you two didn't turn into absolute terrors," Neil grinned.

"Says the biggest world terror himself," Jean said with a small grin. The grin faded. "You were younger than us, it should have been us protecting you."

"I wouldn't change it," Neil said.

"Even so... I'm proud of you." Jean's voice cracks, "You were dealt the worst hand imaginable, but you still played for the full game. You're still here, Hell, you must be pretty good at cards because it even looks like you're winning."

Neil feels something constricting in his chest at the words.

"I'm proud to call you my brother," Jean says.

Neil thinks of all the times that he couldn't stand because he'd been torn open. He thinks of the times he'd taken blow after blow, thinks of his silent sobs in the middle of the night.

He leans his head on Jean's shoulder, and for once he doesn't refute it. Neil doesn't turn the compliment and nice words around. He accepts them.

"Thank you," Neil says.

Kevin and Jean wait out in the car when Betsy and Abby get there. Kevin had finished with Wymack as soon as they walked in.

"Neil!" Betsy says.

And Neil doesn't complain about the warm hug Betsy wraps Neil in. He just buries his face in her shoulder, and allows himself to be comforted by the smell of warm cookies.

The smell used to mean awful things, but now it was Betsy. It was home.

Neil broke at that moment. It was that startling realization of how far he'd come that broke him.

Neil could hear Wymack's heavier footsteps, but he didn't flinch even as Wymack laid a hand on his back.

He didn't flinch.

Neil broke down and told the three of them about how the night before had gone. Told them about seeing his father again. Told them about how he'd killed three people just so that he could come home again.

"My mother is alive," Neil said through his sobs, "She's been alive this entire time. But she didn't think I was worth the risk it would be to get me out. I spent my whole life thinking she was my hero. Thinking she was my family. The only parent who gave a shit about me. It turns out she was never the parent I needed. You guys are more my parents than she ever was."

Betsy's hand stilled in Neil's hair. And she was silent for a moment.

"I don't think we've ever felt more honored." Betsy finally says.

Abby checks Neil's injuries. Abby gives Neil a few things for the cabin trip, and then hugs him. Then she shoos him out the door. Telling him to relax and heal.

Betsy walked him to his cat after alongside Wymack. Betsy gave Neil one last hug. And Wymack put a hand on Neil's shoulder.

"Try not to die," Wymack gruffs, "You're one of my kids that I can't claim life insurance on."

Neil grins, "Now I feel like doing it to spite you."

"Get out of here Neil."

"Yes Coach."

The foxes had everything packed and in their vehicles. Andrew had taken the liberty of packing Jean, Kevin, and Neil's bags. So when they got back, all that was left to do was crowd Neil into the Maserati, and off they went.

Neil had been expecting them to head straight to the cabin, but Andrew led both his car and Jean's car to a nearby liquor store. Neil followed Nicky inside despite the fact that everyone else stayed in the car. And it seemed that where Neil went, Andrew followed.

Nicky grabbed a basket, and Neil already had ten types of alcohol to put in it before Nicky even turned around.

Nicky yelped as Neil dumped the contents into the basket, almost tumbling over at the sudden weight.

They grab a few more things. Neil points out Seth's favorite beer, and that gets grabbed too. Andrew throws in some limes, and Neil grabs some non-alcoholic sodas for mixed drinks. Including ginger beer. The contents got put in the back seat of Jean's car, and then they were off yet again.

Despite Andrew driving well over the speed limit, the upperclassmen still get to the cabin first. Neil tries to help with the bags of alcohol, but when he hisses at the sting in his palms; Andrew snatches the bags away and carries them himself.

Nicky then grabs the rest and gives Neil a pointed stare when Neil tries to help.

"Try and lift anything and I'll spank you," Nicky says, "And not in a fun way."

The inside of the cabin was large and empty, but a laugh on the balcony told Neil where everyone was.

Neil stepped out on the balcony, since he was banned from carrying even his duffle, and approached the hot tub that the upperclassmen were lounging in.

"We got alcohol!" Neil says in lieu of greeting.

The upperclassmen all snap their heads in Neil's direction, and Allison grins.

"We thought you got lost!" Allison says, "We made a stop too and we still beat you here."

Renee is grinning next to Allison.

"We found some new nail polish for you Neil," Renee says, "I think you'll like it."

Neil beams at Renee, happiness flooding him.

"So what do people want to drink?" Neil asked.

Neil took their drink orders and relayed them to Andrew and Nicky who were working the blenders.

Neil watches Kevin to see what drink Kevin picked up. Kevin paused for a moment, staring between the vodka and a virgin strawberry dachere that Andrew had made extra of.

Neil watches discreetly, ready to say something if Kevin falters, but also wanting to see if Kevin would hold strong after a month of no alcohol.

Andrew watched out of the corner of his eye too. And Jean wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was watching as well, luckily Kevin was too deep in thought to notice their attention on him.

Kevin's hand twitched towards the vodka, but Neil watched as Kevin shook his head and physically grabbed his wrist with his other hand, before picking up a virgin dachere and some water.

Jean's face splits into a wide grin, and Andrew gives off an air of quiet satisfaction. Neil however grabs Kevin's sleeve as Kevin passes him by. Kevin glances at Neil in question, and in response, Neil pulls Kevin into a hug. Ignoring the burns and the pain.

"Good job," Neil says, "I'm proud of you."

Kevin hugs Neil back, and Neil doesn't comment on the smile Kevin has on his face when joining the others out on the balcony.

Everyone eventually clears out to the balcony, and Neil is left in the kitchen with Andrew. Andrew is quiet as he cleans up the blenders, and Neil decides the man is much too focused. So he sits on the counter, directly in the way of what Andrew had been doing. Andrew pauses, as if calculating the sudden change in obstacles, before placing the blender he'd been cleaning to the side and dragging Neil into a kiss. Andrew's hands rest on Neil's thighs. The hands eventually find their way to Neil's ass, and Neil can't help the grin he gives against Andrew's lips.

"I've been told I have a great ass," Neil says.

Andrew scowls. "1004%."

Eventually Andrew pushes Neil off the counter and towards the balcony so Andrew could finish cleaning things without a distraction.

He hadn't been amused when Neil purposefully bent over to touch his toes in a "stretch", ass pointed in Andrew's direction. Andrew had shoved his foot against Neil's ass, pushing Neil towards the door.

Neil stepped out to the balcony and stepped a fair distance away from the hot tub the upperclassmen were lounging in, so that he could light his cigarette and drink his whiskey without the added heat from the hot tub.

Every now and then Seth would shout commentary over at Neil, and Neil would fire back with a smart ass comment. Jean would poke fun at Neil, and Neil would either throw something or tell an embarrassing story about Jean. And Neil would poke fun at Kevin, gaining him a "fuck you" in return.

It felt safe, it felt like home.

Eventually Andrew came out with the bottle of whiskey, lighting a cigarette beside Neil. Their arms were touching.

When it came time to go to dinner, the upperclassmen started assigning rooms. Neil and Andrew ended up on the lower level in the double bed. Neither complained, they had slept together in smaller beds than that more and more frequently in the weeks leading up to Baltimore. After dropping their stuff off in their rooms, everyone headed out together for the walk to the main building for dinner.

The walk turned into a race, which Neil had not been allowed to join. And which Andrew had put a stop to when he realized Neil would fight him to run it.

The staff serving dinner gave the group a few odd looks, but they kept to themselves. Neil was thankful for the minor blessings.

For the most part dinner was uneventful, but then Kevin cleared his throat to speak.

"Wymack and I have a plan to get the press off Neil's back in the weeks to come," Kevin says, "We wanted to inform you guys first though. We are going to tell people who my father is."

Neil chokes on his meat.

Andrew looks at Neil and Neil finally manages to swallow.

Neil turns his gaze to Kevin, "You guys don't have to-"

"You shouldn't have to get questions about this for weeks after it happens," Kevin says, "I can't take all the heat off you... but it might keep them occupied enough that you aren't getting bombarded. I owe this to you. I owe a lot to you. Plus Wymack said it was a good plan, he went to the college board today and texted me that he got the okay."

"Okay but why would Wymack need to be—" Nicky cuts himself off with a gasp and a choke.

"Wait! Holy shit!" Nicky says, "No way! I knew Coach was a daddy, but I didn't know he was a *daddy*."

Dan chokes on her food at that. And the rest of the foxes finally clue in.

"Holy shit!"

"No way!"

"That's fucking insane!"

"When did you find out!?"

Neil was still stuck on the "daddy" comment Nicky made.

"Why did Nicky say coach is a daddy like that? I don't understand." Neil asks Andrew.

The others don't notice the deviation in conversation that Neil and Andrew took, but the look on Andrew's face was of long suffering.

"It's an attractive older male," Andrew explains bluntly, "In the way Nicky is using it."

Neil frowns, and thinks for a moment.

"You're a good looking older man," Neil said simply, "Am I supposed to call you daddy?"

The tips of Andrew's ears turn red, and Andrew chokes on the drink he'd been sipping. The upperclassmen glanced over, but luckily Andrew had already regained his composure. Albeit he had a hand clamped over Neil's mouth.

Neil saves the word for future use if it made that kind of reaction.

The upperclassmen turn away, and continue to bombard Kevin with questions.

Neil hears Kevin explaining about how he'd told Wymack when he joined as an assistant coach. He'd known before that but he hadn't wanted to put Wymack in any danger. He explained his mother's reasoning for keeping it quiet.

Eventually the questions died out, and the upperclassmen were satisfied in their gossip.

They all eventually get up and head back to the cabin. More drinks are poured. Neil and Andrew steal more kisses in darkened corners where no one can see them. Stories are shared.

At some point in the night, Neil catches Aaron's eye. Aaron gestures for Neil to meet him outside, and Neil shrugs out of Andrew's grip to do so. Andrew stretches out in his seat after Neil leaves, keeping an eye on Kevin who was doing a dancing game with Matt on the TV and Jean who was trying to avoid getting hit in the face with a remote.

The night had a slight chill to it as Aaron and Neil stepped outside. But Neil didn't mind and shut the door.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Were Aaron's first words. His eyes were sharp and angry.

Neil was taken aback. He didn't understand what he was supposed to have told Aaron.

"Told you what?" Neil asks dumbly.

Aaron's fists clench, but he takes a deep breath to control his apparent anger.

"I know you and I aren't as close as you and Andrew are. But I thought you'd at least tell me if he was in violation of our deal." Aaron says, "He gives me so much shit for Katelyn, but yet he's been with you this entire time."

Neil pauses. Because as far as he knew, Aaron and Andrew's deal was only, "no friends, no serious relationships". Neil wasn't a violation.

"I didn't think he was," Neil says.

"You didn't think that he was violating the deal by being in a relationship with you?" Aaron sounded like he was seething. "I know I haven't kept it. I know I was wrong. But it's fucking stupid that he gets on my ass but in private he has—"

"But he isn't attached to me," Neil cuts in. "If it really came down to it he'd choose you over me."

Aaron halts, and Neil can see the gears in Aaron's head turning. But yet again, Neil didn't understand why.

"What are you saying?" Aaron's brows furrow.

Neil stumbles, "He protects me because of a promise. I think he takes comfort in the fact that I understand him. But he isn't attached to me. I don't think I mean anything to him in the grand scheme of things."

Which wasn't completely true. Neil knew his understanding of Andrew's boundaries meant a lot to the blonde. But he also knew that he wasn't an attachment to Andrew.

"You sure seem attached to him," Aaron says in disbelief.

"I am," Neil agrees.

"And you just think that you mean nothing to him?" Aaron asks.

Neil wasn't seeing the problem. He was happy with what Andrew gave him. And Andrew didn't need to be getting attached to someone who could die by year's end.

Neil nodded.

Aaron runs a hand through his hair. "You're stupid." Aaron says, "Fuck you're both so stupid and you deserve each other."

Neil almost argued that he definitely didn't deserve Andrew, but Aaron spoke again.

"He's more attached than you think," Aaron says quietly.

Neil didn't argue, but he definitely didn't agree.

Aaron slid back inside, and Neil smoked a cigarette on the balcony. And he listened to the sounds of the conversation inside.

Later that night, Renee carried a drunk Seth and Allison back to bed. Matt dragged Dan off to their room. Kevin and Jean went to theirs. Nicky was already passed out on the couch, so Aaron went to his room on his own.

When everyone had disappeared for the night, Andrew led Neil by the waist to the bedroom downstairs, where he proceeded to take Neil apart, piece by piece.

And Neil was content to give Andrew his back later that night, a strong protective arm around his waist.

Protecting Neil even in his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to propose a new pairing.

Randy Boyd/Stephanie Walker

Ultimate lesbian ship

Woman who can kick ass with fists

Another who literally stood up to Edgar Allan's president with words alone

Power couple

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

SORRY ITS LATE!!!

I got in a fight with an abusive motherfucker the other day. Punched him so hard when he tried to get my friend that I dislocated my shoulder and Sprained my wrist.

I would like to say he ended up in the ICU where I did not so HA! I still say I fucking won the fight.

Only some of my pride is damaged from literally throwing out my own shoulder XD

The next day was a day full of hiking. Neil somehow ended up on Andrew's back, being carried at some point when breathing became too difficult with the burns on his chest. Andrew didn't even break a sweat when carrying Neil. And Neil made sure to whisper how hot that was in Andrew's ear for an entire thirty minutes. It was amusing until Neil pulled out the 'daddy' card and Andrew stumbled and fell.

Andrew had glared as he brushed the dirt off of himself. And Neil had laughed. The rest of the team was concerned and asking about what Andrew had tripped over. Andrew glared harder.

Andrew got him back though.

They signed up for horseback riding later that day. Neil's injuries burned at the thought of getting on the horse. But he was a stubborn asshole and did it anyway. It took all of ten minutes for the foxes to see the pathetic display that was Neil attempting to mount a horse and decide to forcibly help him.

Andrew threw Neil over his shoulder before climbing up on the horse and plopping Neil down in front of him. And that display of strength alone was enough for Neil's mind to go haywire.

Then Andrew had to be a dick and slide his hands under Neil's shirt while recounting how he'd taken Neil apart the night prior in Neil's ear.

Neil almost fell off the horse.

After horseback riding, Neil was sore and tired. Not to mention that his bandages needed to be changed out.

Luckily Andrew seemed to realize this, and Neil was pulled down to their room. Renee followed, and they both helped Neil out of his bandages.

Renee's eyes fell on the name Lola had carved into Neil's chest and her jaw clenched. Andrew glanced at Renee's face, gauging her reaction.

"You should have seen it after Evermore," Neil said.

Renee glanced up at Neil and Andrew busied himself with getting the burn cream. Neil continued talking.

"I was branded by them for so long," Neil said, "It's almost funny how now they're all gone. I got into that car, a branded coward who had never truly fought back. And I got out of it as someone who held his ground. And the 'brand' that Lola put on me, is a reminder of the family I held my ground for. The one who taught me I was worth something."

Andrew had frozen in pulling the burn cream from the bag. And Renee stared at Neil with a small hint of a smile.

"I made a promise," Neil said, "That the next scars I got would be from a fight I won... I'm glad I kept it."

Andrew finally moved and handed Renee the bottle of burn cream.

"Who'd you promise that to?" Renee asked, raising her eyebrows at Andrew.

"Myself." Neil responded.

Renee smiled at that, and Andrew regarded Neil with some kind of look. Renee went back to treating Neil's burns. When she'd finished she gave Andrew back the burn cream, before moving towards the door.

"You should let your injuries air out," Renee said before leaving, "It will heal faster."

Neil glanced down at the injuries and sighed. The foxes were sure to make a big deal out of the burns. A shirt was thrown at Neil, it was one of Andrew's soft black ones.

"You can still keep your torso covered," Andrew says.

Neil allows Andrew to help him into the shirt. After the shirt is on, Andrew pauses and holds Neil's face in his hand, his thumb brushed over Neil's lips and traced lightly over the burn on Neil's cheek.

"I like these scars better than your old ones," Andrew said.

Neil grins and tugs Andrew in by his shirt so the blonde is pushing Neil down into the mattress. A light kiss is laid on Neil's lips and Neil mumbles his response against them, "I do too."

It takes all of two seconds for Andrew to flip their positions so that Neil is on top.

Neil blinks, but leans down to kiss Andrew when tugged down.

"Being up here is weird," Neil finally says in regards to the position. "I think I like it when you're over me more."

Andrew's hands gripped Neil's waist just a bit tighter, and Neil swore there was a flash of amusement in Andrew's eyes. Maybe it was arousal.

"Don't like having to do the work Wesninski?" Andrew asked.

But that wasn't the reason. Neil thought for a moment, trying to find his reasoning for being so uncomfortable.

"When you're on top of me," Neil says finally, "It's like you're encasing me and keeping me away from the world. I feel safe."

There was a moment of silence before Andrew tied one of their legs together, then they flipped again.

Neil let out a yelp of surprise that was quickly swallowed by Andrew's mouth.

Neil smiled. And he kept smiling through every kiss, and he only stopped smiling when Andrew brought both of them in hand, Sending them over the edge together. Then his smile was exchanged for something different.

Later Neil and Andrew joined the foxes upstairs. No one commented much on the injuries, but Neil could see their lingering glances. All of them had seen Neil injured enough times, and maybe Renee had already told them what he had said, and the extent.

Neil was grateful.

Kevin however stared at Neil's hands with a nervous expression.

"Are you going to be able to play our next game?" Kevin asked nervously.

To anyone else, the question may have been callous, but Neil knew why Kevin was concerned.

If the foxes didn't make it to championships, then Neil's life could end as soon as the next game.

The other foxes seemed to pick up on that detail as well, because suddenly all of them were staring at Neil's destroyed arms.

"I trust you guys to have it handled," Neil said, "But no... I don't think I'll be good before the next game."

There is a moment of silence. Then Dan speaks.

"We won't let you down," Dan says with a smile, "Plus you not being there means Andrew will be in goal the entire game so I can sub for the strikers. We all know he won't let anything past him."

Andrew didn't say anything, but one of his hands went to Neil's waist, a slight squeeze told Neil everything. Whether or not Neil stepped onto that court, none of the foxes would let them lose that game.

They'd fight to keep Neil with every bit of strength they had.

Neil leaned into Andrew, allowing the blonde to hold him up. He immediately regretted doing so when Allison's face took on a wide grin.

"I'm done with speaking about Exy," Allison said, "This is supposed to be a vacation. I am more interested in talking about how Neil ended up with our resident monster."

Neil shot Allison a dirty look for that comment, but Allison waves her hand around at his glare.

"Relax Neil," Allison said, "We all know he's only a tiny teddy bear with you."

"I have knives, Reynolds," Andrew grinds out.

"A murderous teddy bear," Allison amends, "Either way I want answers."

Neil huffs out a breath, "And what if I don't want to give answers?"

Allison shrugs, "Then you don't have to give them. I just want to know when *this* happened. For the sake of my wallet."

Neil shrugs, "There isn't a *this*. So technically you've all not won anything."

The foxes all raise their eyebrows. But Neil just shrugs in response.

"That's all I'm giving," Neil said.

The foxes gaped at that, and a few brave ones turned to Andrew as if to question it. But they seemed to think better of that idea and didn't.

Jean was the only fox who didn't seem to pay attention to the conversation. Kevin didn't pay attention either, but he was watching an Exy game so that wasn't in any way surprising.

But Jean was looking at his phone in anticipation, clicking it on and off over and over again.

Neil raised an eyebrow at him when Jean glanced up, but Jean flushed red and looked away quickly.

Neil thought it was odd, and he looked to see if Andrew found it odd as well. Andrew hadn't seen the exchange though, he was busy watching Aaron.

Aaron, for once, wasn't glaring at his brother, but instead was giving him the look of "this is coming up later". Neil only hoped he wasn't there when it did.

The foxes lounged about until dinner, and then they walked down and gorged themselves on food, much to Kevin's displeasure.

Neil was offered strawberry ice cream and was going to refuse it. But then Kevin looked so satisfied at Neil turning it down, that Neil just had to ruin it.

Neil even doused the treat in chocolate syrup, just to watch Kevin squirm.

Then he passed it to Andrew when Kevin wasn't looking because the chocolate had made the dessert too sweet for Neil to enjoy it.

He enjoyed the scandalized look that crossed Kevin's face though. And Neil enjoyed the leftover taste of strawberry ice cream in Andrew's mouth when the two went to bed later that night.

So Neil decided he was happy with his dessert choice.

It hit about four in the morning when Neil was startled from his sleep by the bedroom door slamming open.

Neil instantly woke in a frenzy, and tumbled off the bed, taking the sheets and Andrew with him. Andrew, luckily, seemed to get his wits about him quicker than Neil and managed not to land on Neil too roughly.

"GUYS JEREMY JUST ASKED ME ON A DATE!!!"

That... that was Jean's voice. Neil sighed and let his head thunk back against the floor. Meanwhile, Andrew's head fell and rested in the juncture of Neil's neck and shoulder. Neil could feel Andrew's heart pounding just as much as his own.

Neil wasn't sure why Jerney asking Jean out warranted the fucking scare of a lifetime.

"Why did you bust the door down for that?" Neil asked tiredly. Andrew didn't move, likely still trying to recollect, so Neil stayed still despite the burning in his upper body.

"I don't know if I should say yes," Jean said nervously.

Neil internally questioned every time that he'd internally thought of Jean as the quiet, innocent, and intelligent one of the three of them.

Jean was stupid, incredibly stupid.

"Why would you not say yes?" Neil asked.

He gestured with his hands best that he could with Andrew still on top of him.

"I don't want to seem desperate." Jean replied. Then Jean began to pace around the room. Neil felt Andrew's breaths even out on his neck.

That motherfucker fell asleep.

"Like if I say yes too soon," Jean says, "Then he might think I'll take any guy that comes along. I'm thinking I have to play hard to get."

"I don't know what that is," Neil said.

Jean didn't listen and proceeded to panic about Jeremy.

Andrew continued to slumber.

That *asshole*.

"I really like him. I mean I *really* like him," Jean says. "Last thing I need is for him to think I am desperate."

Neil started prodding Andrew, because if he had to sit through this, so did Andrew.

Andrew sent Neil a sleepy glare in response, but managed to stay awake.

Jean looked ready to continue with his tangent, but suddenly Seth jumped into the room in his underwear wielding a frying pan.

"Oh dear god," Neil muttered.

"He can't help you here." Andrew responded.

"WHERE'S THE INTRUDER?! DON'T WORRY NEIL!!! NICKY AND I WILL PROTECT YOU!!!"

Seth's eyes were wide and sleep crazed, his hair was still rumpled from sleep. And he wore boxers with pink hearts all over them. No sooner had Seth spoken, did Nicky jump down the last few stairs while holding a *spatula* .

Nicky was wearing skin tight rainbow boxer briefs, and pink socks.

"YEAH I'LL FUCKING FIGHT THE MAFIA!!!" Nicky shouted, "YOU WON'T TAKE US ALIVE! Neil, you are safe. We've got you!"

Neil just wanted to go back to bed. But he had to give the bastards credit for being brave. He immediately took the credit away when he remembered they brought kitchenware to a fight.

"Fantastic," Neil said sarcastically, "I've been rescued by kitchen utensils."

Neil could feel both his and Andrew's patience slipping away.

Finally Renee stepped in, "Is everyone alright?"

"It's alright Renee," Seth says throwing the frying pan out in front of her, "We've cased the house. We're going to look outside next. I have a frying pan, Nicky has a spatula—"

"I have an Andrew," Neil cuts in, and Andrew huffs out a breath against Neil's neck, "We're fine. Jean just slammed the door open when he was going through his gay panic."

The room settles into an uncomfortable silence as Nicky and Seth finally take in the scene.

Jean standing sheepishly in the corner.

The lights were on.

Andrew lying on top of Neil. The only places they were wearing clothes were covered by a sheet, making the situation look ten times more awkward.

Jean seemed to, only then, see the position Andrew and Neil were in.

"You know what," Jean said, "Maybe I don't mind seeming a bit desperate, I'm gonna go call Jeremy."

Jean darts out of the room like his ass was on fire.

Nicky and Seth were still slowly taking in the scene.

"I told you," Seth said to Nicky finally. "I told you he was gay."

Andrew finally seemed to have enough, "Leave before I decide to stab everyone in this room."

The room cleared out pretty quick after that.

The rest of the foxes laughed over the incident the next morning. Renee told them the story with a smile, leaving out the part about Andrew and Neil's position on the floor.

Neil was thankful for that.

The rest of the vacation week passed far too quickly for Neil's tastes. Around the last day Renee helped Neil paint his nails again, she navigated the new burns carefully, being sure not to get any polish on them.

Neil flashed his middle fingers as he normally did when they dried, and Renee grinned.

On the last night the foxes were watching the sports network on TV, much to Andrew's displeasure. Neil was fidgeting around with one of Kevin's toys he'd gotten from Bee, when Riko's voice filtered through the speakers.

Neil hadn't really been listening to the reporter's, no one in the room really had. They had just had the network on for background noise. But the sound of Riko's voice set all of the foxes on edge.

"We were all shocked to hear Nate's father had gotten out of prison. But honestly none of us were shocked he went after Nate. We were protecting Nathaniel here at Edgar Allan. I know he probably had a tough time with the rumors, but when he left he opened himself up to his father's violence."

"Rumors?"

"You know how Nate is. Sexually curious and active all over the board. He had the tendency to open himself up to unpleasant—"

The TV cuts off, and Dan sits there holding the remote in a clenched fist.

"Fuck him," Dan growls, "This shit isn't funny."

Neil suddenly feels tired, "I don't think he was going for comedy."

Neil spins one of Kevin's toys, irritated and exhausted.

"We are going to destroy him on the fucking court," Allison snaps out, "But now the reporter's are going to be all over Neil again, and their going to ask the stupid fucking questions."

Neil puts his head in his hands and sighs, "I'll handle it. I always—"

"You won't," Kevin cuts in.

Neil glares, but he stops when Kevin's face shows nothing but rage.

"I'll handle it this time," Kevin says.

Neil opens his mouth, but then snaps it shut immediately. He didn't know how to react to that.

He didn't even know if Kevin was being honest. He wasn't sure until they arrived back to campus on Saturday.

Wymack, Betsy, and Abby were waiting for the foxes at the stadium. Abby checked over Neil's injuries and seemed happy with how they were healing. Betsy and Neil talked a bit as well. But Wymack was busy speaking with Kevin.

Kevin was gesturing wildly, there was anger in his eyes. And Wymack was obviously arguing back.

Finally Kevin said something, jabbing his finger towards the ground where he stood, and Wymack went silent. The two stood in silence for a minute, Wymack regarding Kevin's defiant stance with a thoughtful gaze, and finally Wymack threw his hands up in the air. As if to say "Whatever".

When Kevin made his way back over to the foxes, it became clear Neil hadn't been the only one watching.

"What the fuck was that?" Dan asked.

Kevin shrugged, "Neil, Jean, and I will be handling press at the next game."

The foxes went silent for a moment, and Wymack finally stepped up.

"Somehow I feel that the decision is going to drive me to drink," Wymack said, rubbing his face with his hand.

"Add Andrew to make it even more interesting," Neil said.

Wymack visibly shivered at that statement.

Come Monday, Neil was back in classes. Neil had honestly been expecting the College Board to kick up more of a fuss about him staying. But other than a "sorry you got kidnapped" email, they left Neil well enough alone.

Wymack said it was because the college knew who they were signing when Neil put pen to paper, and getting rid of Nathaniel wouldn't look very good in the press since that was the case.

Neil thought that seemed kind of heartless, but then again he'd just killed three people with absolutely zero remorse.

Neil had stopped after classes and found a tree to lounge against while he finally picked up the phone to call Thea.

He had been keeping the woman well informed of what was going on, but after Baltimore he hadn't been able to sit enough to call her.

She picked up on the second ring.

"Nathaniel!" Thea said, breathing out a breath of relief.

Neil grinned as he heard her voice.

"I remembered to tell you I was alive this time," Neil said, "Do I get a cookie?"

"You get a foot up your ass for not doing it sooner," Thea said with a small growl behind the words.

Neil winced. "Sorry, I was kind of busy with recovery."

Thea hummed, but seemed to take it as a good answer, "I've seen what Riko I saying about you in the press... I want you to know I plan on standing with you if they come speak with me."

"I never doubted that Mama Thea," Neil smirked.

"Why do you have to go and make me sound so *old*," Thea asked, annoyed.

Neil laughed.

"Also," Thea said, "I don't have a date yet, but I should be able to make it out to see Kevin soon."

"Just Kevin?" Neil asked, gasping and feigning hurt.

Neil could practically hear the eye roll.

"The 'You and Jean too' was supposed to be implied," Thea said. "Just make sure the asshole doesn't run off like a coward this time."

"Noted," Neil said, "Just let me know what day I have to lock Kevin in the bathroom."

Thea laughs, "I will. Make sure your boyfriend is there too."

"Boyfriend?" Neil asked feigning ignorance.

"The one Jean found you naked underneath." Thea replied.

"That was a misinterpretation."

"I'm sure."

The conversation went on for a few more moments. But ultimately Thea hung up after telling Neil to "Be safe" about forty times.

It got to the point that Neil almost played in traffic just to spite her.

Neil finally slung his bag over his shoulder, and headed back to his dorm.

The parking lot of Fox Tower had four shiny sleek vehicles parked out front. Neil didn't pay them much mind until he got to his room, and found Ichirou Moriyama in his kitchen.

Neil's bag fell off his shoulder when he saw the man, there were at least ten places inside himself telling him to run. But Neil held his ground, and sat down at the table across from Ichirou.

"I didn't think you did house calls My Lord," Neil said.

Four guards were in the room, and Neil is sure there was at least one sniper aiming a bullet at his head, based on the proximity to the window.

Ichirou was nothing like Riko. Where Riko fought to be recognized and did anything to get to that point, Ichirou was already recognized for the simple fact of breathing.

Ichirou Moriyama was born and bred to be a leader, and you could see it in every part of his posture. He didn't act like the world *revolved* around him, he acted like he *allowed* it *not to* .

Ichirou let a small smile grace his face at Neil's comment, but Neil knew it was unlikely the man was actually amused with anything Neil said.

"I wanted to drop by and assure you that the incident in Baltimore was not something I had been aware of. Your father went against my orders to wait," Ichirou said. "I am honoring my end of the deal and letting you have your chance."

"It never crossed my mind that you were dishonoring our deal," Neil said honestly.

Ichirou regarded Neil with a glance. And Neil knew he'd said the right thing.

"I dealt with his circle accordingly," Ichirou said, "I have no room for those who disobey me in my circle."

"Understandable, My Lord," Neil said.

Neil kept his hands linked behind his back, and his eyes trained at the wall. It was the stance he'd learned as a Raven. It felt like Neil was in the military.

"You, apparently, are quite the killer though," Ichirou said, "My most dangerous assassin, and his two most dangerous men."

"I did what I had to do to get home safe," Neil said.

"Yes you tend to do what you have to do," Ichirou said, walking over to the window and looking out of it. Neil swallowed hard. "It seems to be a recurring theme with you. Is your feud with my brother something you 'had to do' as well?"

Neil kept himself in check. He didn't flinch at the mention of Riko.

"I won't allow him to steamroll me," Neil said, "You said you wouldn't interfere until the deal came out with a winner."

"It seems that my lack of interference has caused too many loose ends," Ichirou said, a hint of danger in his voice, "Drake? Proust? Why is it that my life became more difficult with you being out of the nest?"

Neil swallowed, but stayed silent.

"Speak!" Ichirou ordered.

"Riko is volatile when he doesn't get what he wants," Neil said shakily, "And he seems hellbent on getting his perfect court back, damn the consequences. But he would have ended up ruining all three members if we had stayed. He has an inflated vision of his self worth."

Neil was silent after the words left his mouth. He hoped internally that Andrew would not arrive back early.

Ichirou speaks to someone in a language Neil didn't know. It wasn't surprising since Ichirou probably knew many.

"I will wait and see who is the victor." Ichirou said finally, "I want to see who the loose end worth keeping around is."

Neil felt Ichirou grab his chin, and his face was forced towards the man.

"I know you don't plan on letting us take you alive," Ichirou said dangerously, and a bottle of pills is placed into Neil's hand, "You'd better fight to prove you are worth the trouble I go through, or you won't see another year."

Neil swallowed nervously, and his hands closed around the pills Ichirou had placed in his hand. Likely a poison of some kind.

Ichirou pushed out the door, into the empty hallway. His guards followed behind him.

And then he was gone, leaving Neil with a foreboding sense of genuine fear for his life.

Chapter 51

Neil was still sitting in the beanbag holding the pills when Andrew got back from class. Andrew didn't say anything, but instead stepped over to the second chair and sank down into it. He let his bag thunk down on the floor, and Neil could feel Andrew's eyes on him.

For a minute, Neil couldn't manage to get the words out. But eventually he managed to speak.

"Staring," Neil forced out, it sounded choked and strained.

"Is there a reason you're sitting in the dark with a bottle of pills?" Andrew asked, ignoring Neil's comment.

Neil wanted to say it was nothing. He wanted to tell Andrew that everything was fine.

But it wasn't.

Neil's life was in the hands of God himself, and God had never been very kind to Neil.

Telling Andrew everything was fine would be a lie. And Neil refused to lie to Andrew.

"Ichirou had a chat with me today," Neil said, "He said he knows what I plan to do if we lose. He gave me the tool to do it if it comes to that."

Neil held the pill bottle out to Andrew. And he felt it leave his hand when Andrew grabbed it.

Neil sighed and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. It was silent between them for a moment and, when Neil looked over, Andrew was staring at the blank TV. His jaw was

clenched, and his hand was clutching the pill bottle in a white knuckled grip.

"If we lose—"

"Don't!" Andrew snapped, and Neil could hear the plastic bottle creak. He hoped it didn't break in Andrew's hand.

"Andrew, I need to make sure," Neil said.

Andrew's jaw clenched and his face turned towards Neil, his entire posture was poised as if ready for a fight.

"You don't need to make sure of shit Abram," Andrew said.

"Will you let me go?" Neil asked.

Neil knew he was treading dangerous waters. He knew that Andrew was about ten seconds from losing control over his temper.

"Why are you—"

"Drew I won't go back," Neil said quietly, "If I run, Jean and Kevin would pay for my actions. And you can't fight the Moriyamas. You know that. They are too big, bigger than any of you. I need to hear you say that you'll let me go."

It's silent, and Neil can see the shake to Andrew's hands.

"If you go back," Andrew finally says, "There's still a chance—"

"If I go back," Neil interrupted, "The first thing Riko will do is strap me to a bed and let every member of the team use me until I can't even fucking walk. The master will beat me for my insolence. Riko will beat me next. They won't give me food or water for weeks at a time. And ultimately I'll be dead before I even survive a month. My last memories will be of the Ravens and their torture. If I choose the sex ring, I'll be half way across the world with a name change and my hair dyed to please whatever brand of sick fucks is using me that week. And in the end I'd die without anyone to remember me."

Andrew's jaw clenched, "I promised I would protect you."

"And sometimes protection means letting a person go," Neil said.

Andrew was no longer looking at Neil, so Neil slipped off his beanbag and knelt down in front of Andrew.

"Andrew, I need you to promise me," Neil said, "I need you to swear that you'll let me die here, where people care about me. Where my body isn't just going to end up dumped on the side of the road or defiled. Where my last memories won't be some of the worst moments of my fucking life. I need you to swear."

When Andrew turned to look at Neil, Neil saw fear. Neil saw the vulnerability that had been there in Binghamton during the riot. And suddenly Neil couldn't force Andrew to make that promise.

"If you say you can't promise me this," Neil said, "If you really can't stand to watch me die... then I'll go back."

Neil could hear the way Andrew stopped breathing for a moment, and Neil could see the consideration in Andrew's eyes. Then Neil saw self hatred, as if Andrew hated himself for even considering the possibility.

Then Neil finally saw the acceptance.

"You won't go back," Andrew finally said, "I promise that if we lose..." Andrew didn't say anything for a moment, and Neil couldn't see his face, "I promise that if we lose... I'll let you die free."

"And I promise I'll do everything I can to live free," Neil said, he let himself tip forward to rest his head onto Andrew's shoulder. He ignored the way his injuries pulled. "Thank you."

Andrew's arms wrapped around Neil. It wasn't an embrace. It was a resounding prayer.

We're still alive.

The foxes found out about Ichirou's visit, but not about the pills. Neil was sure to tell them that Ichirou knew about his plans to die instead of going back to the Nest.

Neil expected it to make the rest of the practice somber, but instead it seemed to light a fire under every foxes' ass.

Even Kevin's.

That night at night practice, Andrew hopped into goal as he had since before Baltimore. Andrew had given more to practice than he ever had before. And at night practice the trend only continued.

Kevin, however, did something Neil hadn't seen in a long time.

It was about halfway through night practice. Andrew hadn't let any of the strikers get a goal. And Nicky and Jean were playing to a professional level.

Watching Nicky keep up with Kevin, after months of training and hard work, was absolutely amazing. Nicky kept footing with Kevin, stick-checking and blocking with everything he had.

Kevin wasn't making it easy on him or Andrew.

The impromptu scrimmage of backline versus front line was a brilliant flash of colors and growth.

Andrew cleared the ball for probably the thirtieth time in a span of ten minutes, and Kevin caught it in his racket and started forward.

Nicky ran at Kevin, moving to check or block Kevin's right hand. But suddenly Kevin's racket fluidly switched to his left. The ball was shot, and the goal lit up red.

Neil's mouth was agape as he watched. Pride thrummed through his chest as he looked at Kevin, and Neil couldn't help the grin and loud cheer he let out. The other four players on the court, who had been frozen in shock and staring at Kevin, turned to look at Neil.

Kevin gave Neil the smile of someone who wasn't giving up any time soon, the smile of a fighter. Fire lit behind eyes that had been dull like a puppet's for far too long.

"Hey Neil," Kevin said, standing proud in the middle of the foxhole court. The orange racket in his hand was blinding. His eyes burning with the drive of a fox instead of a Raven, "I'm moving forward too."

"About damn time," Andrew said, slinging the racket over his shoulder.

"We've been waiting for you to get your head out of your ass," Jean threw in.

Neil knew, the foxes weren't letting the Ravens win without one hell of a fight.

On Wednesday, the press yet again swarmed the campus. Neil avoided them, he had no reason to speak with any of them, and no desire to do so.

But that didn't mean the reporter's didn't give one hell of an effort.

Renee had to take Neil's knives after the fourth time a camera was shoved in his face.

If only she'd waited a second longer, then Neil doubted any reporters would come within ten feet of him ever again.

Unfortunately Renee was quick and smart, and grabbed the knives before Neil could unleash them on the badgering journalists.

Neil and Andrew went to Betsy's later that evening. The sessions weren't terribly eventful until it came time to leave. Aaron, who'd become a regular fixture on Wednesdays, spoke up before they left.

"I have an appointment with Betsy tomorrow morning," Aaron said to Andrew, and surprisingly, Neil as well, "I want you both to be there."

Andrew paused at that, he'd been about to drive off, but Neil watched as Andrew put the car back into park.

"You could have just done it tonight," Andrew said, "Instead of wasting my time tomorrow."

"Tonight was your session," Aaron said, "I know I've done a bad job at understanding you before, but I understand that you don't like when people encroach on your territory. Tomorrow will be my session, which means it's my choice who I bring in, and this way it won't be crossing your boundaries."

Neil was impressed.

Unfortunately he'd taken the backseat, so he couldn't see if Andrew was impressed as well.

Andrew said nothing, but a grunt and a jerk of the head said that he'd be there. And by extension, that meant Neil would be there as well.

Kissing was a 'no' that night. Too many questions had been hurled at Neil about his time with the Ravens. Too many reporters had been in his personal space. And it would seem Andrew's mind was too stuck on what the session with his brother, the next day, would bring.

Despite kissing being a no. Andrew still held out a hand for Neil to join him in bed that night.

They fell asleep, one of Andrew's hands was holding the pulse on Neil's wrist, while the other lay directly over Neil's beating heart. And Neil could feel Andrew's heartbeat on his back as he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning came with coffee, and a gentle morning kiss, before they met Aaron out by the Maserati.

After they'd all three piled in. Aaron finally spoke.

"I'm only saying this because I know you hate surprises," Aaron said, "But Katelyn will be there."

Neil could see the angry set to Andrew's jaw at that revelation.

"It's my session," Aaron said, "And you know that this needs to happen."

"Tell me right now why I shouldn't cut you open for this," Andrew growled.

"You can do it after," Aaron responded, "If you really don't like what I have to say, then you can do it after. But I've been wording and re-wording this in my head for days now. So at least listen and hear me out."

Neil half expected Aaron to say please, but Aaron didn't. He simply stared at his brother while holding his ground.

Everything was silent for a while. And Neil wondered if Aaron was about to die. But Andrew made no move to harm his brother.

Andrew's fists clenched and unbleached by his sides.

Eventually Andrew got into the car, and angrily gestured for Aaron to get in as well.

Neil hurried in step to get in before Andrew took off.

The drive was full of silent anger, but Neil had to hand it to Aaron. Even in the presence of Andrew's unrelenting ire, Aaron didn't flinch.

Katelyn was waiting for them at the front, and Neil could see Andrew's eyes flash dangerously when he saw her.

Neil barely resisted the urge to brush his thumb against Andrew's in an attempt to comfort. Neil knew without needing to be told that touch was a no at that moment.

Betsy, for her credit, seemed to know not to keep them waiting long. They hadn't even cleared the doors before she was there and led them back.

Instead of Betsy's normal office, Betsy led them into a new room.

Neil felt both of Andrew's knives slip into his pocket, and Neil glanced at Andrew's face in question.

Andrew offered no response.

Once the door shut, the tension only grew.

Neil and Katelyn sat in chairs across from a couch. Andrew sat on the couch in a manner that didn't allow for Aaron to sit with him. So Aaron stood.

Katelyn fidgeted nervously beside Neil as Betsy started them off.

"Aaron only said that he wanted to speak with you today," Betsy said, "I am here only as a moderator."

"He can speak," Andrew snarled, "But I hope he knows I might cut out his tongue."

Andrew's eyes trained on Katelyn, his gaze murderous.

Betsy went to interject, but Aaron got there first.

"You won't," Aaron said, "Because I *need* you to listen to *me* for once. I know you know how it feels to not be listened to. So just this once I ask that you listen."

Andrew's gaze snapped to Aaron, and Aaron calmly stared right back.

Andrew's jaw clenched, but finally he sank back into the couch. No longer looking like he was about to attack.

Andrew didn't seem happy about it, but still he made a "Get on with it" gesture.

Aaron breathed a few times. Maybe he was reigning in his anger. Maybe he was reigning in his fear.

"It's no secret that I've never understood you," Aaron said. "It's no secret that I thought for a long time that you were an emotionless bastard who kept me locked into the deal because you wanted to see me unhappy. It's no secret that I thought you killed my mother for your own gain. It's definitely no secret that I hated you."

Neil didn't miss the use of the past tense.

"Off to a great start," Andrew said sarcastically, "Unfortunately it's also the end. Goodbye. Let's do this again... never."

Andrew started towards the door but Aaron spoke again.

"I was wrong," Aaron said, "I was wrong about all of that."

Andrew froze. Neil couldn't see his face anymore, but he could see the tenseness in Andrew's shoulders.

Aaron must have seen it too, because he took a deep breath before he continued to speak.

"I had no interest in having a relationship with you for a long time after Tilda died." Aaron said.

The use of his Mother's first name didn't go unnoticed by anyone.

"But I talked to Neil, and asked how the hell the two of you got along. And he said something about understanding. So I started watching, and I started looking. And even though it's far from perfect I started getting it."

Aaron's voice was beginning to shake. But Andrew hadn't moved.

"I know why you make these deals Andrew... or well... I don't... But I know why it's so important to you that they are kept. I thought for a long time you got off on the control over my life—"

Andrew tensed at that, but Aaron hurriedly carried on.

"But I know it's because too many fucking people lied to you. And I'm sorry that I became one of the people that went behind your back and lied to you."

Andrew didn't respond, but he did something so much more impressive. He continued to listen.

"I'll be honest when I found out that you and Neil were a thing, I was angry because I thought you to be a total hypocrite." Aaron said. "But now I think you're just an idiot."

Andrew whipped around at that, and Neil watched as Andrew's eyes widened slightly.

Neil snapped his head to look at Aaron, trying to see what had caused Andrew's shock.

Aaron was crying. But he gave a small laugh before he continued.

"He means nothing to you right?" Aaron asked, "You keep telling yourself that, and telling yourself it won't matter if he disappears. So technically you weren't breaking our deal. Because technically you weren't in a relationship with him."

Andrew's hands clenched along with his jaw.

"But I know what you want Andrew. I know because I tried that exact same thing with Katelyn. I told myself that she didn't mean anything to me. Because I thought she would leave once she figured me out. I thought she would leave when she learned I was a past drug addict who still stood behind his brother like a scared little kid."

Neil could barely pay attention to the words being said, his mind so caught up on the emotions in the room.

"But you know what Andrew? Katelyn didn't leave me. She didn't leave me when I forced her to keep quiet about us. She didn't leave when she saw my track marks. She didn't leave when I shot a person. She didn't leave when I broke down in her arms. She understood me, and I know you know what that's like because Neil is *that* for you ."

Neil found himself gaping at the floor, wondering how Aaron ever thought this was going to work.

"So why keep this deal Andrew?" Aaron said, "Let's get rid of it. Let's admit we want the two people who understand us most in life. Let's be brothers instead of business partners."

It was silent for a moment.

"I know we don't talk about our feelings," Aaron said, "This is the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I've been agonizing over how to say this. I scheduled my own sessions with Betsy so that I could work through shit before coming to you. Andrew, I want to be a doctor. I want to be with Katelyn. I want to one day marry her, and I want to have kids and give them the parents we deserved growing up. And I want their Uncle Neil and Uncle Andrew to be there helping them. Teaching them how to protect themselves. Teaching them about consent and fucking Exy. I want my brother."

Andrew had taken to staring at the floor. His jaw tense.

"But... if this deal means that much to you," Aaron said, "I will do what I should have done years ago and abide by it. But if we do that... we aren't yanking them along with us anymore. Because both of our people deserve better than to be dragged along and told they mean nothing to us."

Aaron points at Katelyn and Neil as he says those words.

"If you decide this deal is what's important, then I'll understand. I'll delete Katelyn's number from my phone, and I'll tell her not to talk to me anymore. Neil and I can switch rooms, and our deal will remain until we graduate. But we need to make a choice."

Neil stared in shock at his shoes. Beside him Katelyn didn't seem surprised, and Neil wondered if Aaron had told her beforehand.

Andrew stared at the floor, his jaw was clenched tightly. And Neil's heart sank.

He'd known one day it would come to this. Andrew had said he wasn't going to get attached. Aaron had misread the situation terribly, but Neil didn't blame him. Whether or not this session had the intended outcome, the words said had been important.

"It's okay," Neil says quietly, already getting up and moving towards the door. "You said you weren't attached. I'm not going to make you say it."

Neil turned around and smiled, despite the pain he felt. It was a dull pain, because even though he wouldn't be able to kiss Andrew anymore, or have Andrew hold him.

Neil was happy simply having Andrew in his life. Neil was happy with whatever Andrew could give.

"Thank you Drew," Neil said, "I'm glad I got to have you, even if I couldn't keep you."

Neil walked out, ignoring Betsy's call for him to wait. Neil skipped the Maserati and instead ran back to Fox Tower.

Neil packed a few things into his bag, before running to Wymack's apartment.

Wymack allowed Neil to skip practice, and spend the day watching Exy on the couch. Before eventually night came, and Neil fell asleep.

Despite using his left hand at night practice, Kevin used his right for the game on Friday.

Neil didn't question it. He knew it wasn't time to unleash that secret yet. A secret weapon to face the Ravens with.

Seth almost said something, but Neil elbowed him hard to get him to shut up.

Andrew sent Neil glances throughout all of the pre-game talk. But Neil did his best to keep from looking at the blonde. He would be able to stare at Andrew again eventually, but he needed time for the ache in his chest to go away.

The Binghamton Bearcats hit the court with an aggressive style. Their arrogance was so pungent that Neil nearly gagged on it. He wished several times he was out on the court so he could slam several of them into the walls.

The game was instantly violent. And it sent Neil's teeth grinding in anger.

The Bearcats were trying to take out another fox. Most notably a striker. Neil watched as Seth, Kevin, and Dan were checked illegally, and shoved around. Neil watched as Dan's teeth

grit with the effort not to punch someone.

Their striker line couldn't afford to be carded. They only had one sub as it was, and even if Seth and Kevin could play full games, the Bearcats was too good a team to be safe with only two strikers.

Neil waited with baited breath for one of the foxes to snap and get carded. But the only players who got carded were the Bearcats.

The foxes kept their cool, like an animal stalking its prey and slowly backing it into a corner. Neil could see their urge to pounce. Could taste it in the air.

But the foxes video their time, and played one of the best games Neil had ever seen them play.

Halftime was exhausting, but luckily Wymack toned down the speech. The coach sensed the emotional toll the game was having on the foxes.

They'd been kicked and bullied their whole lives. To be kicked and bullied on the court was unforgivable.

But the foxes were choosing to win instead of keeping their pride. And that made Neil more proud of them than anything else ever would.

"I'm going to need a drink after this," Seth groaned.

"Tell me about it," Dan responded, "I want this game to end already. Let's send these pathetic fucks packing with their tails stuck between their legs. Then we can go back and fucking drink!"

The foxes all cheered at that.

"Do we even have any alcohol?" Nicky asked, "I know we are out in our dorm."

"Us too," Matt groaned.

"We haven't had any since Kevin quit," Jean threw out.

"Neil?" Allison asked, "You guys got any?"

Neil hadn't been back to their dorm last night so he wasn't precisely sure, "I think we have a couple beers."

The foxes all groaned in disappointment.

"Everything will be closed by the time the game is done," Nicky groaned.

Salvation for the foxes came in a rather surprising way.

"Katelyn has got some," Aaron said, "I can message her and have her bring some to the tower. We can set up in the basement and party with the Vixens."

Neil's head snapped up at that. Aaron caught the movement, took in Neil's surprised features, and then sent Andrew an exasperated glance.

The foxes were all asking questions about Aaron and Katelyn. Several of them sending wary glances at Andrew.

Nothing more than that was done though, because the warning buzzer for the end of half time sounded, and the foxes all headed back out to the court.

The second half was rougher than the first, but the foxes kept their cool.

The buzzer signaled a 7-5 fox win. And Neil watched as Aaron ripped off his helmet before striding over to Katelyn and kissing her in front of everyone.

Neil's mouth fell open.

It didn't make sense.

Did Aaron and Andrew change the deal to allow Katelyn? Neil could see it happening. After the speech Aaron had given Neil could see Andrew possibly considering it.

But still it felt like something was missing.

Neil got hauled from his thoughts when Kevin dragged him away from the sight for press duty.

Dan giggled at Neil's scowl. And Jean smiled as he walked along beside Neil.

The reporters swarmed them as they entered the press room. And Neil grimaced at the camera flashes.

The reporter's managed to keep it to the game for all of two questions before suddenly everyone began talking all at once.

"Do you think Nathaniel's reputation will come down on the foxes?"

"Do you have any desire to return to Edgar Allan after Nathaniel's recent scandals?"

"Will you ever play with Riko again?"

"Nathaniel, would you care to comment on your father?"

Kevin cut everything off with a hardened glare that had even Neil staring at him in shock.

"I'm not a Raven!" Kevin said strongly, "I never should have been one. I should have gone to Coach Wymack the day that I found out he was my father, and never looked back. But having said that, there is one part of Edgar Allan that I will never regret and that's meeting *Neil* . Neil was a better brother, and is a better player than Riko ever could hope to be. So *no* , I will not be returning to Edgar Allan because of Neil's 'scandal'. The only problem is Riko never having learned the meaning of the word no, and me having never been skiing. Tell Riko the foxes will be meeting and beating him on the court this year. Goodbye."

Neil hadn't been expecting that. And based on Jean's reaction, neither had he. Kevin left Neil and Jean sitting in the press room with gaping mouths.

"We'll shit," Neil said quietly.

"Great," Wymack said tiredly from his place behind Neil, " Now there's three of you."

The foxes all cheered when Kevin, Neil, and Jean stepped into the locker room. And Neil finally got over his shock enough to grin.

The three of them had *finally* moved forward together.

And Neil felt a brief spark of hope spring to life in his chest.

It was dangerous, and disquieting. But he liked it in spite of all of that.

The party at fox tower kicked off without Neil. Despite wanting to celebrate the win with his foxes, Neil had been put through an emotional ringer the last few days, and slipped off before anyone could catch him. Neil grabbed his bag and made his way down the stairs to run to Wymack's apartment.

Neil was just passing by Andrew's car when a voice stopped him.

"You know you could just sleep in our dorm," Andrew said. Andrew blew a cloud of smoke into the air, before flicking the cigarette butt to the side. "I hear we have beds. And beds are typically more comfortable than couches."

Neil felt confusion flare up inside himself.

"I thought Aaron and I were going to switch," Neil said.

It shouldn't be his and Andrew's dorm anymore. Andrew had chosen the deal of course. Because why would anyone choose Neil. Why would anyone—

"Yes or no, Junkie?" Andrew asked.

Neil almost said no, because he didn't want to hope that maybe Andrew had chosen him. Didn't want that hope to be crushed.

But he trusted Andrew with *every piece* of himself.

"Yes," Neil choked out.

Andrew's lips on Neil's felt like coming home. The hands on his hips felt like safety.

Andrew's forehead rested against Neil's when they broke apart.

Andrew was quiet for a moment, his hands shook slightly. Then he finally spoke.

"I chose you junkie," Andrew said, " So stop being stupid and come home."

Neil ignored the sudden wave of disbelief, because Andrew didn't lie.

Andrew had chosen Neil.

That thought sent more happiness, more contentment through Neil than anything ever had.

"Take me home Drew." Neil said.

Andrew took him by the hand, and did just that.

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

7569 words

Neil was in the middle of doing his homework on Saturday morning when Thea texted him. He sat with a book open while he laid against Andrew's chest and he'd had to struggle to get his phone out of his back pocket so he could begrudgingly check it.

From Thea

I'll be there in thirty minutes. Make sure the coward doesn't run from me this time.

Neil was out of Andrew's lap and dialing Jean in seconds. He kept the phone on speaker.

"Jean," Neil said when the backliner picked up, "Code Stickball, Code Stickball."

Neil could hear something drop and shatter twice, once over the phone, and then once from the thin walls separating their rooms.

"Am I initiating plan Backliner or plan striker?" Jean asked.

"Plan Striker," Neil responded.

Andrew was staring at Neil with a raised eyebrow.

"Roger," Jean said, before switching his voice to something sweeter, "Hey Kevin! I can't find my glasses!"

Neil could hear Kevin's grumble through the wall.

There was a moment of the two players "searching around" before finally Jean said, "Maybe the bathroom?"

A minute later there was a resounding slam that echoed through the dorms and the sound of furniture being pushed around. And then Kevin's resounding sounds of protest.

"Plan Striker is engaged!" Jean said hurriedly, "Kevin has been locked in the bathroom."

"What?" Andrew deadpans in the background.

Neil ignored him.

"Thea will be here in about twenty seven minutes," Neil said, Neil could hear Kevin's protests kick up a bit, and realized Jean had probably switched the call to speaker. "Keep the target on lockdown!"

"I will keep target on—"

A loud crash came from both over the phone and from the room next door.

"TARGET HAS ESCAPED!!!" Jean shouted.

Neil was already out the door and tearing after Kevin.

"Not today you fucker!" Neil shouted, tearing down the hall.

"What the— FUCK"

Seth had stepped out of his dorm at the worst possible moment. All three Ex-Ravens were barreling down the hall of Fox Tower at a breakneck pace.

Seth barely had time to scream and jump out of the way, before Kevin, Jean, and Neil slammed into Matt and Seth's dorm.

Matt was trying to make breakfast, and was unfortunate enough to step right into the line of escape for Kevin. Kevin managed to spin out and avoid Matt. Neil slid between Matt's legs. But Jean was not as quick to avoid the sudden obstacle, and suddenly eggs and bacon flew everywhere as Matt and Jean tumbled to the ground in a mess of limbs and breakfast food.

Kevin ran into the bedroom, and climbed onto Matt's bed using the small amount of spring there, to hop over Neil and back out the door.

"What the fuck!?" Dan shot up in Matt's bed after Kevin had vaulted, pulling a sheet over her body as a shield.

"SORRY," Neil shouted as he used the wall as a quick way to kick into a turn, "WE ARE TRYING TO LOCK KEVIN IN A BATHROOM!!!"

That didn't seem to satisfy Dan's curiosity, because Neil still heard a resounding, "WHAT!?" as he tore out of the bedroom, hot on Kevin's heels.

Kevin slammed into the girls dorm, screaming, "HELP THEY ARE TRYING TO LOCK ME IN THE FUCKING BATHROOM!!!"

Kevin dove under the table and to the other side. Then he and Neil were in a standoff.

Allison stood, mouth agape and hair curlers still in.

But Renee was staring at Neil and Kevin calculatingly.

Jean, who'd disappeared, was standing beside Renee. Renee glanced at Jean, then at Kevin.

"Make the right choice Renee," Kevin said.

Renee shook her head, "Sorry Kevin. You definitely owe Thea a conversation."

Renee dove for Kevin and Kevin let out an ungodly screech before vaulting over the top of Neil yet again. And the chase continued.

"STOP FUCKING JUMPING OVER ME YOU FUCKHEAD JOLLY GREEN GIANT!!!"
Neil screamed.

Nicky made the awful error of stepping into the doorway to see what was going on. And was bowled over completely by Kevin.

"Sorry Nicky!" Neil yelled vaulting over Nicky's wheezing form.

"Apologies," Jean said, doing the same.

"There's ice packs in our fridge," Renee said following suit.

Aaron was out in the hall, smiling and holding hands with Katelyn. He turned when he heard the commotion down the hall, and his eyes widened and jaw dropped.

Aaron barely yanked Katelyn out of the line of fire.

Kevin pulled a maneuver out when he realized there was no way he was going to be able to wait out the elevator. He dropped and slid. And Neil was moving too fast to avoid tripping over him.

Neil tripped and flew into the wall. He fell to the ground, and groaned when Renee and Jean quickly joined him on the floor of shame. Kevin was not normally better at Neil in a game of chase. But goddamn if he wasn't running as if escaping the devil himself.

Andrew was now in Kevin's line of fire.

"ANDREW HELP!!!" Kevin called.

"REMEMBER WHO LET'S YOU DO THE FUCKING, AND THEN REMEMBER WHO FUCKS YOU OVER IN PRACTICE!!!" Neil shouted pointing at Andrew.

That seemed to decide it, because Andrew dove at Kevin without hesitation.

Kevin leapt over Andrew as Andrew dove, barely clearing the blonde, and ran like a bat out of hell for the stairs.

Renee, Andrew, Jean, and Neil hit the stairwell behind Kevin with the speed and ferocity of people trying to escape a building that was about to explode.

Neil hopped over the banister and was right on Kevin's heels by the time they reached the second floor landing.

Kevin let out another ungodly screech, and dove through the access to the second floor as Neil made to tackle him. Kevin dove overtop Neil once Neil was on the ground, and vaulted down the stairs again.

"Keep giving chase!" Neil shouted, stumbling to his feet. "I'm gonna cut the bastard off!"

Neil ran to the end of the Second floor and jumped out the open window and into the bushes below. He internally thanked the sky that he was damn near cleared to play, otherwise he probably would have hurt himself.

Neil could feel shrubbery sticking out of his hair as he clawed his way out of the bushes, and ran around the corner. The door opened and Kevin ran out right as Neil leapt and tackled him to the ground. At that exact moment, Wymack got out of his truck alongside Thea.

"TARGET ACQUIRED!" Neil shouted.

Kevin struggles up to the moment that he finally sees Thea, then he gives up with a huff.

Wymack stares at the scene, his mouth partially open in shock or disappointment.

Neil looks to the doors to see all of the foxes standing there with similar expressions on their faces.

"I'll pick you up in a few hours," Wymack says to Thea after a moment of solid silence. "I'm going to go drink."

Kevin got dragged off by Thea to Jean and Kevin's dorm. Kevin's face resembled that of a kicked puppy the entire way up.

The rest of the foxes filed back up to their rooms, likely about to try and finish their interrupted weekend routines.

Jean stuck with Andrew and Neil on the way up to their dorm, and then entered their dorm with them.

Neil curled up with Andrew again and went back to his homework, while Jean turned the TV onto Exy.

Neil made it through two problems before he began doodling in the margins of his notebook. He kept writing "Neil" over and over again in different versions of lettering.

At the moment he was Nathaniel Wesninski legally. But Agent Browning had said he'd help Neil change it.

Neil knew he wanted his first name to be Neil. And he was certain he wanted to keep his middle name as Abram. But the last name was giving Neil some trouble.

Neil tapped his pen on his notebook as he tried to think of last names he could possibly choose.

Problem was, last names were hard. Either they were too generic like Brown or Smith, or they were names that just simply didn't feel right.

Neil puffed out a breath, blowing a stray hair out of his face. Technically he had plenty of time, he could probably wait years to change his name and be just fine. But a part of him wanted to change it before the match against the Ravens. A part of him wanted to wear a new last name on the back of his jersey. One last fuck you to Riko before the game that decided both their lives.

"Last names are hard," Neil said, letting his head fall back against Andrew's shoulder.

Andrew didn't respond, but instead flipped to the next page of the book he was reading.

"Little shit," Jean suggested.

Neil flipped him off in response.

"Asshole. Neil Abram Asshole," Jean sent out another suggestion.

"You're not being helpful," Neil glared.

"Okay I'll try harder," Jean said, "Dickhead."

Neil glared, but he couldn't hold back the grin when he saw how amused Jean was by his own antics.

Andrew suddenly reached out and stole the pen from Neil's hand, before scrawling out a name in neat tidy handwriting.

Neil Abram—

"Is that really okay?" Neil asks with wide eyes.

In response, Andrew only circles the name before underlining it three times.

The name Andrew wrote would certainly piss Riko off more than life itself.

"Riko will be pissed," Neil said. But a smirk was already adorning his features as he texted Wymack that he would need a new jersey.

"And you've cared about what Riko thinks since when?" Andrew asks.

Neil turns towards Andrew with a smile.

"Since never."

Jean watched the exchange in confusion.

"Wait... what's the name?" Jean asked.

Neil had been about to respond, he really had. But suddenly a loud moan carried through the thin wall separating Kevin and Jean's dorm from Andrew and Neil's.

There were heavy thumps, and the sound of a mattress squeaking.

"Oh God Yes," Kevin's voice carried far too loudly.

Jean pursed his lips and scrunched up his nose.

"Do you think they are fucking?" Jean asked quietly.

Neil had to take a moment to reign in his sarcastic response to that question. Then Kevin let out a sharp keening whine.

"God! Just like that!"

"No Jean," Neil said keeping a straight face, "I think that they are currently at the stove and trading nice innocent kisses while watching Exy and eating pancakes."

Another sharp moan cut through the air, and Neil began to wonder if Kevin was wearing a microphone attached to speakers with how loud it was.

"Yes Jean! They are fucking!" Neil said, gesturing with his hands wildly.

Neil expected it to be over quick. But close to an hour passed, and by God Kevin was still moaning.

At that point Andrew had moved to the window, and Neil couldn't decide if he was stress smoking or contemplative over the fact that Kevin was the only one they could hear.

Jean had buried his head in his hands, looking thoroughly traumatized.

"OH GOD!!! YES THEA YES!!!" Kevin's scream was the last straw for Neil.

And based on the knock on the door, and Renee entering with pursed lips, it had been the last straw for most of the people in Fox Tower.

Neil got up and went to the closet before pulling out the megaphone, and walking up to the wall that Andrew's bed shared with Kevin's.

They had tried to play nice. They had shut the bedroom door, they had even put up blankets to muffle the sounds.

Neil was done playing nice. If Kevin wanted to be loud. Neil would be loud too.

Neil put the mic up to his mouth.

"KEVIN DAY!!! HOW COME I CAN HEAR YOU, BUT NOT THE FUCKING WOMAN YOU GHOSTED FOR MONTHS!?"

Neil's megaphone did the trick. And Neil heard a quiet, "Oh my god," from Thea through the wall.

Jean was cackling in the other room, and suddenly all the foxes were standing in the doorway of Neil and Andrew's dorm.

Neil heard another moan from Kevin.

"JESUS KEVIN," Neil said, "IF YOU ARE MOANING LOUDER THAN HER I THINK YOU'RE FUCKING DOING IT WRONG!!!"

"Fuck you—"

Kevin cut himself off with another shaky moan.

"Is he being pegged?" Nicky asked.

Neil glanced at Nicky confused.

"WHAT'S PEGGING?" Neil hadn't meant to say it into the megaphone. But he couldn't change the past so, Oh well.

"It's uh—"

Seth looked at Andrew, as if trying to get Andrew to explain.

Andrew glared, "No. I'm not explaining this."

Kevin's moans picked up in the other room, but Neil was now distracted by this new seed of information.

Nicky fumbles with his phone for a moment, before messing around with it and handing it to Neil.

Nicky had handed Neil a porn video. Neil didn't hold the phone very close to the mic, but still the megaphone picked up the cheesy moans.

Neil meanwhile watched it with a clinical gaze. Carefully learning and notating the scene with a certain detachment that only reassured him of his Gray Ace sexuality.

When the video ended, Neil nodded with a certain understanding.

Kevin moaned again. And Neil had to hand it to Thea. This woman didn't get distracted for shit.

"THAT'S RIGHT THEA!!!" Neil shouted. "FUCK HIM REAL GOOD!!!"

"Oh... my god," Dan muttered, covering her face.

"I suddenly see the asexuality now," Matt said, gaping. "How the fuck is he doing this with a straight face?"

"I am a creature of anger and spite and it is the life-force that drives me," Neil said pointing at Matt.

Andrew was staring at Neil, lips slightly parted and a cigarette dangling from his lips.

"HIT IT FROM THE REAR AND MAKE THINGS CLEAR!!! HIT FROM THE BACK, GIVE EM' A HEART ATTACK!!! HIT HIM FROM BEHIND TILL HE GOES BLIND!!! GO THEA!!! GO, GO GO, GO THEA!!! GO, GO GO!!!"

Neil was shaking his hips from side to side and jumping back and forth on Andrew's bed like an impromptu cheerleader. At one point he actually timed his jumps with the creaking of Kevin's bed.

Finally Kevin let out a loud groan, a few swears, and suddenly everything went quiet.

Except for Neil. Neil jumped and cheered on the bed.

"About fucking time!" Neil yelled.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Wymack's voice cut through Neil's cheers.

Neil turned to find most of the foxes collapsed onto the floor in laughter. Andrew was the only one who stayed standing, his eyes on Neil with one eyebrow raised.

Neil turns back to the megaphone one last time, "ALL RIGHT KEVIN SHE PLEASURED YOU. TIME TO GET ON YOUR KNEES AND GIVE HER A NICE APOLOGY!"

"Fuck you—"

"Ah, ah!" Neil said, "Less yapping more tongue lapping."

Wymack sighed, long and hard. His eyes closed.

"I just learned more about my son's sex life than I ever wanted to know," Wymack groaned.

Neil stared, unblinking. "Is that a bad thing?"

"I need to take Thea back to her car," Wymack said, ignoring Neil's question. "Just tell her to find me when she... finishes."

Wymack grimaced at his own word choice before leaving. The foxes had finally managed to stop their peels of laughter, and most of them were laying on the floor breathing hard.

Andrew however stepped over to Neil and stood beside him. Neil grinned brightly at the twinkle of amusement in Andrew's eye, and Neil managed to steal a kiss while the foxes were too busy wheezing to notice.

Not even moments later, Thea appears in the door. She raised an eyebrow at Neil, a small smirk on her face.

Not one to be outdone, Neil smirked back.

"Still a bastard I see," Thea said.

"I thought you already knew this," Neil grinned.

Thea walked over and pulled Neil into a hug. Andrew stepped away when Thea approached, but didn't go far. Andrew simply laid down on the bed and stretched out.

"Forgive me for hoping maybe a few more months away from the nest would finally make you less of one." Thea said.

"I don't see how cheering you on makes me a bastard," Neil said indignantly.

Thea rolls her eyes, but apparently realizes that she would never win against Neil in a battle of snappy retorts, because she let's Neil have the last word and ruffles his hair.

Seconds later Kevin stumbles into the room, looking thoroughly wrecked.

Dan lets out a whistle, and Kevin flips her off. But despite the middle finger, Kevin looks far too relaxed after being drilled to actually put any heat behind his gesture.

Neil expects Thea to leave after that. Afterall, the woman was busy and constantly needed at practices, charity events, and photo shoots. But Thea finally releases Neil's shoulders when her eyes fall on Andrew.

Kevin moves towards Neil at the same time that Thea moves towards Andrew.

"I need to speak with you Minyard," Thea says, her voice dangerous. "It'll be important that you listen to me."

Andrew had closed his eyes at some point, and opened them when Thea spoke to him. There was a moment of silence, before Andrew nodded and guided Thea out to the hall.

Thea ruffled a still giggling Jean's hair when she passed. The door to their dorm shuts and Neil glances at Kevin in confusion.

"You really thought Thea would let you date anyone without giving them the 'hurt him and I'll shove your own balls so far down your throat that your dick reemerges out your ass' speech?" Kevin asked.

Neil's face turns red in embarrassment and he jerks to go stop that train wreck, but Kevin stops him. Neil glares without any real heat.

"Payback you little shit," Kevin glares right back.

At some point the foxes filed out of the room and left, but Andrew and Thea still hadn't gotten back. And they were nowhere to be seen in the hall.

Neil briefly wondered if one or both had been murdered.

It wasn't until around an hour later that Andrew returned. Kevin and Jean had gone back to their room. So Neil and Andrew were alone when Andrew came back.

Neil smiled sheepishly at Andrew's raised eyebrow.

"I think she's a bit protective," Neil tells Andrew.

"You think?" Andrew says simply.

Andrew places his hands on Neil's hips and pulls Neil further towards him.

"What did she say?" Neil asked.

Andrew didn't say much, but his hands slid up to find Neil's pulse.

"She said if I hurt you, she'd kill me. Typical shovel talk bullshit."

"I don't think she was lying," Neil grimaced.

Andrew was silent, "No. But it wasn't necessary."

"Then why did you go along with it?" Neil asked, he felt himself getting backed up towards the bedroom and he grinned.

"Because you deserved it," Andrew said.

Neil wasn't sure what part of it Andrew was referring to. The embarrassment, or having someone care about him.

Either way, Neil didn't dwell on it. Instead he allowed Andrew to kiss him and the day away.

Neil would have been thrilled to have Andrew kiss him the entire night as well. But at six Kevin came slamming on the door for night practice, and Andrew and Neil reluctantly got up to go.

The night before the Trojan's match, panic finally began to set in. Before now, Neil hadn't felt the level of impending doom that threatened to swallow him whole. But the Trojans were a whole different breed of monster. And Neil wasn't sure how the foxes would fare against them.

The fear of death was no longer a shock to Neil, he'd felt it strongly in Baltimore while his father was attempting to murder him. The fear of death made things more difficult though.

And sometimes Neil missed his suicidal mind.

Neil missed the lack of fear and the ability to face a situation without worrying about the end result.

"Sometimes" ended up being the night before the Trojans match. Neil went for one of his longer runs, trying to outrun his fear. Trying to force himself to regress so that he could have a clear head.

But it didn't work. The whole reason he wanted his suicidal mindset back was so he could live.

Even so, Neil continued to run far beyond the time that even night practice ended. And by the time he got back, Andrew was asleep with his phone clutched in his hand.

Andrew had known Neil was running. He'd passed by Neil a few times throughout Neil's run. So Neil could only assume Andrew had fallen asleep with his phone turned up in case Neil had called for help.

Neil went to sleep in his own bed that night, not wanting to wake Andrew. But when he awoke the next morning, it was to Andrew waking him softly, before climbing into bed with him.

Andrew found the pulse on his wrist and held it.

That alone alleviated some of the knots piling up in Neil's chest.

The Trojans' court was the same size as the Foxes', but the red and gold theme of the Trojans' stadium made it appear smaller than it actually was.

Neil began regretting telling everyone he might die at the end of the year, Neil could see it on every Fox's face that they were thinking about what would happen if they lost now.

Neil could see them trying to brush it off and not think about it. Could see them trying to focus on the present.

But Neil was quietly thinking about the pills Andrew kept in his bag. Something they had agreed upon him doing, so that Neil didn't have a constant reminder of what might happen. But also so that it was there in case they lost. Neither of them wanted to waste too much time with the act. The risk that Tetsuji or Riko would send someone to drag him back was too great.

Andrew picked up on Neil's mood far before anyone else did.

"I thought your little Junkie heart would be soaring at the thought of playing these guys," Andrew said.

The foxes had come leaps and bounds from the broken mess that they were at the start of the year, but the Trojans were still better.

With a full roster, talented players, and good sportsmanship, the Trojans were arguably better than even the Ravens.

More players were recruited to Court from USC than from Edgar Allan.

It had been a sore spot in Riko's armor, something he grumbled about non stop whenever it came time to face USC on the court.

But Riko just didn't get why the Trojans were better. It was because the Trojans weren't just about winning the next game or the next championship, they were all about Winning Exy in all entirety. They took risks to better themselves, and those risks always paid off in one way or another.

There was a reason why Jean, Kevin, and Neil were fans of the team since they were young. But the fact that it might be the Trojans sealing the end to Neil's life was also nerve inducing.

Andrew quirked an eyebrow at Neil, and Neil realized he'd phased out for far too long.

"I could die after this game," Neil said quietly, "I feel like I am allowed to be nervous here."

The other foxes were too busy goofing off and looking around the court to see Andrew place a hand on the back of Neil's neck to calm him.

"We won't lose," Andrew said strongly.

Neil calmed a little under the strength and honesty in Andrew's eyes.

"I believe you," Neil said. But still his eyes flitted to Andrew's bag, where the dreaded pills were.

Andrew grabbed Neil's chin, and forced Neil to look at him. Andrew's eyes were fierce. His gaze was unwavering.

"You don't think about those damn pills," Andrew said, "Because you aren't using them. Not tonight."

Neil took a deep breath, allowing the oxygen to chase away the fear.

"Okay," Neil said.

After the doors opened and people were let in, one of the members of USC's staff came over to give the rundown of the night's events. She explained that there would be recruiters coming to the game, and her gaze settled on Seth as the Foxes' only Senior on the team.

Seth had already gotten one offer, but he hadn't yet officially signed it. Neil was interested to see if Seth would get more after their match against the Trojans.

Finally when she got to the end of her spiel her eyes darted over Kevin, Jean, and Neil. Then to Wymack.

"Is there anything else you need?" The staff member asked kindly.

Wymack looked at her, "We never got a copy of tonight's lineup."

The staff member blinked a few times before pulling out her phone, tapping it a few times, and then looking back up with a frown.

"I'll see if I can find that for you," She said honestly.

She scurried away in a hurry.

Neil wished he could scurry away too. His nerves picked up slightly and his breathing hitched. And Andrew's hand clamped down on the back of Neil's neck.

"Focus on the game Neil," Andrew said.

Neil forced himself to breathe out, and nodded. Then he refocused his attention back to Wymack.

"I need people for the pregame interview," Wymack said.

The foxes pointed at Neil.

"Fuck no," Wymack said, "Someone else."

Neil was grateful, even if he was slightly curious as to why Wymack was so quick to deny him access to the press. Neil wouldn't have been up for the interview anyways.

Kevin and Dan ended up being the ones to do the pregame interviews. Though Dan looked physically ill at having to speak before the night's game.

Neil felt ill at having to play the game regardless.

Andrew's hand tightened slightly on Neil's neck. A firm unwavering tether to reality that Neil always found in Andrew.

The foxes got ready and waited a few more moments in the locker room to see if someone would bring the lineup. But no one did, and eventually the foxes had to head back into the court.

Jeremy Knox stood there waiting for them in all of his gear.

His face split into a wide grin when he spotted Kevin, Jean, and Neil. And soon enough Neil was being yanked away from Andrew and pulled into a very uncomfortable group hug.

It was so sweet it made Neil's teeth rot.

Andrew's face turned sour when Jeremy stole Neil, but the blonde seemed to let it happen regardless.

Jeremy seemed to remember where he was because suddenly he jumped back from the group hug and slapped his forehead.

"Sorry!" He exclaimed, "Where the hell are my manners? Hello Coach Wymack! Hello Foxes! Welcome to SoCal! We are excited to be hosting you!"

"God you are so happy," Neil said with wide eyes, "I'd forgotten how utterly terrifying it is."

Neil yelps when Jean and Kevin smack the back of his head, and he pouts.

Neil could see a small, barely there smile pass over Andrew's lips. The sight helped Neil to keep his cool for longer. He was losing it for sure. But he had not completely lost it yet.

Jeremy grins, "Neil It's been such a long time! You stopped texting me!"

"That's because talking to you once fills my happiness quota for five fucking years."

Another smack. Another small twitch of the lips.

Neil glares.

Jeremy gives Jean a smile and a nod. Neil sees Jean blush out of the corner of his eye. "We're still good for after the game right?" Jeremy asks.

Jean nods, "Yes!"

Jeremy smiles before turning to Kevin, "You three are crazy. I thought Neil was the one who made the press quiver in fear! What was that at your last game man!?"

Kevin smiled and hugged Jeremy again easily when the Captain pulled him into another hug.

"Something that needed to be said," Kevin replied easily. "We are excited to play you all tonight."

Jeremy smiled and took something out of his pocket. He handed it over to Wymack.

"That's our lineup for tonight's game," Jeremy said with a smile, "We are trying something new. Sorry about how late it is, we were trying to avoid backlash."

The foxes blinked, "Backlash?" Dan questioned.

Neil glanced at the paper from over Wymack's shoulder. The Trojans had purposefully made their roster as short as the Foxes'.

"No way!" Neil said glaringly, "We don't accept your pity."

Andrew glared at Neil.

"Isn't this life of death for you?" Nicky asked in German, "I feel like we should accept pity."

True but irrelevant. Neil opened his mouth for a retort, but Jeremy interrupted him.

"It isn't pity," Jeremy said. "The foxes have made a big commotion this year, and you all have done it while being the smallest school in the NCAA. The Trojans want to know if we could do what you all are doing with numbers like that."

Neil knew the Trojans were risk takers, but not with this big of one.

"You're fucking crazy," Jean said in shock.

"Maybe," Jeremy shrugs, " But I can't say when the last time I've been this excited for a game was. I'm absolutely stoked. Bring your A game foxes!"

Jeremy left them with another smile, and a wave.

The foxes stared after the Trojans captain in shock, and Neil felt something akin to hope spreading in his chest. For the first time all day, nervous desperation turned into excitement and hunger for a win.

They could do this.

When the Trojans lineup was announced, the players entering the court were met with shocked and outraged cries from the stands. Of course none of the Trojans gave a single fuck, and Neil had to applaud them for that.

"Their own school knows that they're dead," Wymack said gruffly, " Now get out there and win!!!"

Once the game started, Neil wanted to take Wymack's words and shove them down the coach's throat.

Winning against the Trojans, even with the smaller numbers, was a fucking nightmare. The first half was a fight, albeit a clean one.

The Trojans were always sportsmanlike, but they didn't give ground on the court, and the first 35 minutes had Neil's heart sinking in his chest.

It was seven to four by halftime, and Neil had to press himself into a corner in the locker room to get his breathing under control after seeing the score.

It hadn't worked, and soon enough he was stumbling past Wymack and into the showers. He felt the lingering gaze of death as it loomed over his shoulder. The gaze had been there Neil's entire life. And Now Neil wanted it gone.

Wymack seemed to allow Neil his private breakdown in the back, because no foxes followed Neil.

Neil knew he needed to focus on the game. But he was shaking. He was scared.

"You aren't doing this alone, Junkie," Andrew said. And a hand clamped onto Neil's neck.

Neil breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

"I'm scared," Neil finally chokes out. "I don't want to die."

The words were expected now after Baltimore. Neil's actions had confirmed them twice over.

But the honesty, bluntness, and ease that the five words come with is jarring.

"I'm not going to let you," Andrew said.

"You can't promise me that," Neil said quietly. "You can't promise me that, and promise to let me go if I die."

"I promise that I'm not letting you go tonight," Andrew says strongly.

Neil finally glances up to Andrew's eyes. The hazel burned like golden fire. Andrew had pulled off his helmet, so Neil could see every inch of messy blonde hair.

Neil remained quiet and closed his eyes. He thought of things he wanted to survive for. Thought of Andrew. Thought of the foxes. Thought about how Jean had a date later that night with Jeremy Knox.

"If we win tonight," Neil said, "Can I blow you."

Neil reveled in the fact that Andrew lost face for a second.

For a brief moment Andrew didn't respond. The words weren't a deal or a promise of any kind. It was simply something Neil wanted to look forward to, an offer.

"Next week in Columbia," Andrew finally responds.

Neil grins slightly. And Andrew stills the shake to Neil's hands with his own.

"I'm sorry," Renee said when Andrew and Neil reentered.

"It isn't your fault," Nicky said with a groan, "Damn they are fucking good."

Andrew put a calming hand on the back of Neil's neck. The foxes' nerves rubbed off on Neil quickly.

"They won't be scoring in the next half," Andrew said, his voice loud enough to be heard by the entire locker room, but his eyes were trained solely on Neil's.

The foxes looked shell shocked at that, staring at Andrew like he was a Norse God.

"Andrew's right," Wymack said drawing the eyes to him, "They killed themselves in that first half. Their entire lineup is exhausted. They don't know how to pace themselves a full game with that small of a team."

Neil began to breathe again as he heard that. This was possible.

Neil's legs still shook as he made his way back to the sidelines later though. His entire form filled with nervous energy.

"Neil," Andrew forced Neil to look at him, "Zero."

In the past Andrew had asked Neil to give him a number. And Neil finally breathed when Andrew gave a number to himself.

Andrew would deliver.

"Four," Neil gave the number he would score.

Andrew pulled Neil closer so that their helmets tapped against each other.

"You are coming home tonight," Andrew said.

"Home," Neil agreed.

Kevin cleared his throat awkwardly, gaining him an elbow to the side from Nicky. And Neil flushed when he realized that the entire team had witnessed the moment.

"Calming someone down using sexual frustration is always a way to go," Seth said nodding.

Neil internally hoped Seth slept with one eye open, lest Andrew smother him in his sleep that night.

The second half began, and the foxes hit the court running. The Trojans did not.

Kevin and Neil scored like their lives depended on it.

Oh wait.

But the Trojans had mistakenly used all their energy in the first half. Both their front and backline was in pieces and disjointed from exhaustion. And Laila, despite all her talent in goal, was nothing compared to Andrew.

At the twenty-five minute mark, Kevin, Neil, and Seth finally closed the gap. And then they finally pulled ahead.

There were cries of outrage from the stands as the final buzzer sounded. But not a single member of the Trojan's team looked disappointed.

Neil felt happiness swell in his chest, but that was quickly ignored when his backliner mark, Alvarez, practically collapsed.

Neil jumped forward to catch her before she hurt herself in the fall. It was only fair after the good sportsmanship the Trojans had shown.

"Thank God!" Alvarez said tiredly. "Oh my god I thought I was going to die. Wesninski, do I have legs? Oh God I can't scissor without legs."

Neil didn't know what scissoring was. But he nodded nonetheless.

"I think the legs are still there," Neil nodded.

Laila made her way over slowly, and Alvarez glanced at her.

"Babe you are doing the work tonight, I have no legs." Alvarez states.

Laila raises an eyebrow, "You mean after I do all the work in the game, I get to do all the work tonight too?"

Neil was still confused, but Andrew was suddenly standing beside Neil. A light touch on Neil's back.

Neil was still holding Alvarez up.

"I'm never walking again," Alvarez groaned, "My legs need to be amputated. Baby you need to carry me."

"Hell no," Laila fired back, " You're heavy."

Neil nodded in agreement, not because Alvarez was particularly big. But because she was completely dead weight.

Laila still stepped forward and grabbed Alvarez.

Laila glanced at Neil and Andrew.

"Thanks," Laila said, " But you'd best be getting back to your team now."

Alvarez grinned at him, " Yeah! I'm going to find out if someone with no legs can scissor."

Neil blinked, but ultimately decided he no longer wanted to be a part of the confusing conversation, and followed Andrew away.

"Why would she need her legs to use scissors?"

"No. I'm not explaining."

The foxes spent the night in California so Jean could go on his date, and at Jean's request, no foxes tagged along.

Jeremy had been a bit startled when Andrew handed him a knife and told him to kill Riko or anyone who tried to attack Jean. But to his credit, Jeremy had simply traded the flowers he had brought for the knife, and had agreed easily.

There had been conviction in the sunshine boy's voice. And Neil had to admit to being impressed, he didn't think Jeremy had the balls to touch a knife.

Neil and Andrew stayed up waiting for Jean to arrive back. And at around one in the morning, right on time for curfew, Jeremy dropped Jean off and kissed the backliners cheek before waving goodbye to Neil and Andrew. He'd attempted to give the knife back, but Andrew had shrugged and told him to keep it.

It was as close as Andrew would get to approving of Jeremy.

Jeremy left with a smile on his face. And Neil smiled when a blush remained on Jean's face, far into the night.

The following Friday, the foxes had the day off so they watched the Trojans versus Ravens match. Unsurprisingly, the Ravens won.

Neil had sank to his knees on the floor, slowly unraveling.

It was Andrew who pulled him back.

Neil heard a knock on the door close to the time they were leaving for Columbia, timid and small. And though he was confused about who would knock like that, Andrew apparently was not. Andrew strode over to the door and opened it, startling the person who knocked on the other side.

Katelyn.

"You told me to meet you here before we left," Katelyn said nervously, "And... uh... I didn't tell Aaron like you asked."

Neil felt that was a bit stupid, because now Andrew could hide her body without anyone knowing he'd killed her.

Neil most likely wouldn't rat him out.

Surprisingly, and against all odds, Andrew was calm. He pulled Katelyn into the dorm and shut the door.

Katelyn was silent.

"I don't trust you," Andrew started out.

Katelyn stiffened. But Neil had to give the girl credit, she didn't back down.

"You haven't exactly given me the chance at trust," Katelyn responded. Her voice shook, but she didn't flinch under Andrew's gaze, "So I'd assume that'd be why."

Andrew was quiet for a moment.

"That's why you're coming to Columbia," Andrew responded.

Katelyn shucked in a harsh breath. And Neil only assumed it was because she knew what happened in Columbia past times.

She still didn't waver.

Neil figured unwavering was a trait you needed with either Minyard. Maybe Katelyn and him could compare notes.

"I'll go." Katelyn said, "I'll answer any questions you might have. But you won't drug me."

Neil saw Andrew's hands twitch at that. Maybe remembering when he had drugged Neil.

"You won't drug me," Katelyn repeated, "Especially not when we are in a crowded club where you could lose track of me."

Andrew was quiet for a moment before speaking again, "I don't do that anymore."

Katelyn looked slightly shocked. But she eventually nodded.

"Okay," She said.

Aaron did a double take when he saw Katelyn and Andrew walking to the Maserati together. Aaron stepped forward to intervene, but Neil got in the way.

"I'll make sure nothing happens," Neil says, "But I'm pretty sure this is just a shovel talk. Let it happen."

Aaron stared at Neil in disbelief for a moment. Disbelief snapped to anger. But finally it softened to acceptance.

"Don't let her get hurt," Aaron said.

Neil only nodded in response.

Nicky tried to keep a steady flow of conversation on the way to Columbia. But Neil could see how nervous Katelyn was the entire ride. Andrew didn't ask any questions yet.

Sweeties was silent on Andrew's part as well. And no one commented on the lack of cracker dust. Likely because Katelyn was there.

Neil however ordered strawberry ice cream, and that got Katelyn and him into a conversation about the best kinds of fruits.

They agreed strawberries were superior.

Neil was sent up for drinks by himself, though Andrew slipped a knife into Neil's back pocket before Neil darted up to the bar.

Aaron stayed with Katelyn and Andrew. And Jean, Kevin, and Nicky also nervously hovered around the table.

Roland startled when he saw Neil finally. His face morphed into a grin and he bounded over.

"Neil!" Roland said, "God you just can't seem to stay out of the news!"

Neil brought a hand up to brush the new scars on his face self consciously.

Roland winced.

"On the bright side," Neil said dryly, "People might stop having seizures when they look at me now."

Roland barked out a laugh, but behind him a guy whistled at Neil again, and then winked.

"Send him home." Neil said simply.

Roland rolled his eyes and got Neil the drinks for the table.

When Neil got back, the table was still silent. But Jean and Kevin managed to drag Aaron and Nicky to the dance floor.

Then Andrew began talking.

"The last woman who hit him was in a *terrible* accident," Andrew glared hard at Katelyn, "Remember that."

Katelyn blinked. And Neil saw her eyes widen slightly. But she didn't flinch. Finally she relaxed.

"You should have made her suffer more," Katelyn responded.

From then on, Katelyn fell into an easy flow of talking without Andrew's responses.

She talked about how an Aunt of hers recently adopted a kid. Not to mention she babbled on about her nephew. Pictures of her Cousin and Nephew littered her phone gallery.

Neil hadn't expected Andrew to participate in the conversation. But he was surprised when Andrew did indeed look at the pictures shown to him.

At one point Katelyn and Andrew got in a debate over cats versus dogs. And then the conversation turned more serious.

"Aaron and I clicked because my parents died soon after I turned eighteen," Katelyn said, "I raise my two younger sisters. It was a fight to get Social Services to let me keep them."

Katelyn glared at the table, "Fucking assholes literally come around at every turn with some bullshit excuse about me not being a proper guardian. Like they could provide any better."

Andrew didn't react to the statement, but his jaw clenched slightly.

"It's okay though," Katelyn said, "With the scholarship and my part time job. I manage. Aaron is a godsend when school work is difficult. We take the same classes so he helps me study sometimes. Not to mention that my one sister is legal now and married, and she sends some money when she can to help me with raising our youngest. She'll be an adult in five more years."

Katelyn flips the phone and shows a picture of a thirteen year old girl wearing a cheer outfit.

Katelyn sighs, "She's a bit timid though. The boys at school mess with her. I taught her how to punch! But I'm definitely no fighter."

It was silent for a moment.

"I could teach her," Andrew said.

Katelyn snapped to attention, almost as if having forgotten Andrew was even there.

"Yeah," Katelyn finally chokes out, "Maybe this summer? She is in honors classes so she is pretty busy during the school year."

Andrew's head jerks up in a nod, and Katelyn gets a shy smile on her face.

When they leave, a guy grabs Katelyn's wrist.

But the situation is quickly ended when Andrew presses a knife to the guy's back.

"Don't touch what's mine," Andrew says.

Neil just turns to Aaron who looks completely shell shocked.

"Told you," Neil grins.

It isn't till later, when Andrew and Neil are in their room that Neil remembers about blowing Andrew.

"I'm cleared to play," Neil says sliding up beside Andrew.

Andrew gives Neil an unimpressed look.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asks.

"Yes. Yes or no, Drew."

"Yes."

Neil learned rather quickly he had no clue how to suck dick. Granted he had no gag reflex, but he really didn't know how to be an active participant.

"Are you just going to stare?"

"Quiet, I'm trying to plan this in my head."

"You are overthinking this."

"No it's like Exy, you need a game plan and a play."

"Did you just compare sucking my dick to Exy?"

"My head thinks of life in terms of Exy."

"That's pathetic."

"Apparently pathetic works so stop complaining."

Neil eventually figured it out. His jaw ached after, but the glow on Andrew's skin made the slight twinge worth it. As did the kisses, and Andrew in general.

And Neil allowed himself to dream of the future when he finally went to sleep that night.

Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

WOW I HAD ALOT HAPPENING SORRY!!! broke my glasses, split my knee open, my sister went through a wjole thing, went through a breakup, i started working two jobs, my grandpa died, i moved out!!! HOLY SHIT BUT IM STILL HERE!!!!

Neil made an attempt to spend even more time with the foxes after the Ravens beat the Trojans. The ERC gave both the Foxes and Ravens a week off, canceling the last semi-final match. There was no point to having the Ravens and Foxes play twice when they both passed through to the Final already.

The news was bursting the day after the Trojans versus Ravens match. Many people said the Ravens would wipe the floor with the Foxes. Very few people believed the underdog Foxes could scrounge up a win. Even Fox fans were hesitant to place their bets on the foxes, though all of them said they would support the foxes regardless.

With all the sports news talking about the "upcoming fox loss" and how splendid the Ravens were, Neil found himself clutching more and more to the foxes.

He often ended up in Jean and Kevin's dorm watching Exy, normally he'd crawl across their laps as they watched games. And Kevin would play with Neil's hair like they'd done back in the nest. Jean would banter with Neil, and of course they'd pull stupid pranks on each other.

Neil also tried his best to visit the girls in their dorm. He'd baked cookies with Renee. He let Allison do his makeup, over and over as she practiced various "looks". He allowed Dan to teach him how to dance.

Neil searched out Aaron for study sessions in science. Neil got coffee with Nicky at lunch.

Matt and Seth no longer had to even ask Neil for him to join them for stupid movie marathons.

Neil even went with Seth to buy even more plants. Though considering the way you could no longer see the window, Neil assumed Seth already had far too many plants.

And no matter where Neil went, Andrew followed.

Neil and Andrew no longer slept separately, hadn't since Baltimore. Even on Andrew's worst nights he still held tight to Neil's pulse. Normally on the bad nights they slept on the floor in a nest of blankets face to face, where they could sleep further apart. Even then Andrew held Neil's pulse as they slept.

On the good nights, they would sleep with Neil's back to Andrew, and Andrew would wrap his arms around Neil. One hand over Neil's pulse on his wrist, and the other arm snaking under Neil's side and to the heartbeat in Neil's chest.

Every now and then, Andrew would wake up with a start. His breathing pattern would change, waking Neil, and after Andrew was sure Neil was awake Andrew would bury his face in Neil's neck.

It was as if each place Andrew could feel a heartbeat, needed to be covered and protected.

It had been that way since Baltimore, Neil had noticed.

Every time Andrew did it, Neil recalled the look of fear in Andrew's eyes as Neil was yanked away.

Knowing what Neil knew now, he indulged Andrew with the tiny comfort of being able to feel him alive. Of knowing that Neil hadn't been ripped away. Neil managed not to tease Andrew about it, and he never brought it up. It was a vulnerability that Andrew gave him, and Neil wouldn't take it for granted.

And quite honestly Neil enjoyed the grounding touch. And every now and then, he would place both his hands over the one that would cover Neil's heart.

I'm still here.

Andrew would normally respond by telling Neil to go to sleep. But on nights where he buried his face into Neil's neck, he only clutched the pulse on Neil's wrist a little tighter.

After the Ravens beat the Trojans, Andrew seemed to hold Neil a little tighter.

With the threat of his own demise looming over him, Neil didn't question it.

The foxes seemed to grip tighter to Neil as well. The Monday after the Ravens beat the Trojans, every single fox was at night practice. Neil expected Kevin to berate them all, saying how they would never be good enough in time. But Kevin didn't. Kevin still berated them on their form, and their angles. But Kevin also taught them like he believed they could do it.

Andrew gave it his all in night practice, even going as far as giving the backline advice on how to better help him guard the goal.

Night practice went so late that Wednesday that Wymack walked in at 8 am to the foxes practicing. He'd sent them all home to get ready for classes. But Neil could see the barest smile on Wymack's face.

Later that night after therapy was said and done, Neil finally got his new ID and Social Security card.

No longer was his name Nathaniel Abram Wesninski.

Neil practically slammed into the bedroom to show Andrew.

"Look what came in!" Neil exclaimed.

Neil vaulted onto the bed and flopped down next to Andrew, skillfully avoiding falling on the blonde.

Andrew hummed but didn't look up from his book.

Andrew was a secret bookworm.

"Look," Neil said, dropping the card on Andrew's chest.

Andrew finally put down his book and picked up the card. He glanced at it for only a moment, his fingers ghosting over the name.

"Does that count as marriage?" Neil asked with a grin, "Can I check that off my bucket list?"

"You're stupid," Andrew said flicking the card back at Neil. Despite his words, Andrew latched onto Neil's arm and pulled him down.

Andrew's hands go to Neil's hips once Neil hoists himself back up. Neil grins at Andrew. For so much time he was tied to that name. Barred in a cage as a Raven. And now Neil was a fox. He had a new name. He had a new family. He had Andrew.

Never had he thought freedom would feel so amazing.

Neil grinned even wider, "But you like it."

Andrew pushed Neil off the bed, and Neil fell in a heaping pile of giggles and laughter.

"Go pester someone else," Andrew drawled.

Despite the words, Andrew's face was softer than normal as he stared at Neil. His head propped onto his hand as he stared over the edge of the bed.

"Yes daddy," Neil said with a smirk.

A pillow nailed Neil straight in the face.

Neil called Wymack as soon as he peeled himself off the floor of laughter. Wymack of course answered with a huff.

"Who died?" Wymack asked.

Neil frowned, "Why do you only ask that question when I call?"

Wymack was silent for a moment, "Wesninski. I want you to think very carefully about this past year... and then I dare you to ask that question again."

Well now Neil wanted to, out of nothing but pure spite.

"Why do you only ask that question when I call?" Neil asked, a small grin gracing his face.

There was a long pause of long-suffering silence. The type of silence where Neil almost felt bad for the brain cells he destroyed purposefully inside another person's head. It was only this

small amount of pity that kept Neil from goading Wymack on even further. Neil would give the man at least 20 seconds before he was an asshole again.

"Could you process your disappointment a little faster?" Neil asked, "I have a day full of disappointing others ahead of me."

Well *shit* he certainly *tried* to go for twenty seconds.

"You're an asshole," Wymack said.

"I've been told," Neil responded, "I've been told it's charming."

"It's not!" Andrew called from the other room.

"And yet you certainly seemed to like it when I had your dick down my throat!"

"I remember you shutting the fuck up while you sucked my dick! Of course I found that enjoyable!"

Neil was going to respond, but then Wymack made a sound of utter disappointment over the phone.

"Why did you call?" Wymack asked.

"Oh!" Neil said, "I wanted to know when my new jersey is coming in. I got my ID today."

Wymack was silent for a moment.

"Wait, you were serious? You really changed your name? I thought you were fucking with me."

"Nope. I was serious."

"... How much is this going to piss off Riko?"

"Do you want the answer that will make you feel better or the true answer?"

"How about I order the new jersey and hang up so that my sanity stays intact."

"That's probably your best option, yeah."

And Wymack did. The coach hung up the phone quickly, and Neil grinned in triumph.

Neil found the rest of the week passed far too quickly for his liking. And the week after was filled with finals for classes.

Neil stretched himself thin trying to get work for classes done, spend time with his foxes, and practice Exy.

And as the Raven game approached closer and closer, Neil found himself struggling more and more to keep it together.

Andrew had thrown their game calendar in the trash, and the other foxes followed suit when it became clear Neil had a panic attack every time he looked at it. An invisible timer sat above Neil's head yet again this year, and Neil could feel the seconds slowly slipping away from him.

The foxes could feel it too.

It was in every glance. It was in every hug. It was in every prank and word exchanged.

It was in everytime Andrew awoke feeling around for Neil in a panic, and only calming when he finally put a hand over Neil's pulses.

"I need more time," Neil told Betsy in session on Wednesday, tears began to work their way into his eyes, "I just want to have all of this for a bit longer."

Betsy didn't say anything, and Neil could see her struggling too.

Finally after a minute of solid silence Betsy said, "I wish you had more time too."

Everyone was careful not to promise anything for this game. This game was too unknown, it was a toss up in the air. All of it full of uncertainty. Neil could see Andrew wanted to promise. That Andrew wanted to ask for a promise.

But Neil wouldn't let them do that to themselves. Wouldn't allow a promise neither were sure if they could keep.

He wouldn't allow for the amount of self hatred that might bring.

After therapy on Wednesday, Neil wasn't ready to head back. As much as he wanted as much time as possible with his foxes, he wasn't ready for the day to end. So he stole the keys of the Maserati off of Andrew, with no protest from the blonde, and he drove them.

The destination didn't matter. The ticking bomb about to go off suddenly didn't either. It was just Neil and Andrew debating stupid things, like who on the team would die in the zombie apocalypse. Dark jokes. Soft smiles. Kisses at traffic lights. Fingers holding pulses.

Eventually Neil pulled off to the side of the road and got out, leaning against the guard rail as he lit a cigarette.

There was so much he needed to ensure happened if he died on Friday, but he didn't want to say any of it. He had his heartfelt speeches prepared. He was ready to tell the foxes no when they asked if they could be there for him. He knew he wanted to be cremated and given back to the foxes. What the foxes did with the ashes was up to them. He knew all of the things that he wanted to happen if he died, but he wanted none of that to be said into the air that night.

Andrew kissed Neil again, and again. Lips on Neil's neck, sucking a mark over Neil's pulse. The two of them standing together in the middle of a nowhere road overlooking a view that meant nothing, all while knowing each moment together meant absolutely everything.

Neil wanted to dream of the future while Andrew's fingers danced across his skin. Gentle touches on a broken canvas that had no right feeling as put together as it did under Andrew's hands.

"Where can I—"

"Anywhere, Neil."

Neil of course chose the muscles in Andrew's back and arms, much to the blonde's amusement.

Neil could feel Andrew straining against a smirk against Neil's lips.

Neil pinched Andrew's side in retaliation, and Neil got his lip bitten in response. Despite it all Neil smiled.

"We should play Pro together," Neil said when Andrew stuck his hands in Neil's back pockets.

Andrew paused in kissing Neil, and gave Neil what might be considered to be an incredulous look. Though on Andrew's face it just looked bored to most.

"Are you talking about Exy while kissing me?" Andrew asked.

Neil huffed out a laugh and glanced at Andrew.

The night had long since arrived, and brought with it the chirping of crickets and other various wildlife. There were trees all around them and all down the hill guarded from cars by a guardrail. But yet they weren't so far in the middle of nowhere that their phones didn't work. And there was a street lamp hanging above them. The street lamp illuminated Andrew's features, and Neil decided he loved when Andrew was bathed in a glow. Whether it be from the sun, moon, or a shifty flickering street lamp in the middle of nowhere.

Neil finally refocused his attention to the conversation.

"I'm talking about the future," Neil said, "Let's stay together. Let's play pro Exy. Let's get five cats. Let us get a house on the lake. Let's stay like this forever."

Andrew was silent, and suddenly wouldn't meet Neil's eyes.

"Forever doesn't exist," Andrew said. Andrew's fingers connected with Neil's pulse, his thumb tracing patterns in the back of Neil's hands.

It wasn't like Andrew was wrong. Forever didn't exist. In fact Neil living till next week wasn't even a certainty. After all the time Neil spent with Andrew, Neil knew Andrew wasn't as apathetic to Friday's life or death match as he seemed.

And after Andrew chose Neil, it wasn't hard to figure out that it was because of more than a fear of breaking a promise.

And Neil couldn't reassure him. Not when everything could go wrong on Friday. Not when any promise he could make might turn into a lie.

Neil had never lied to Andrew, and Neil wouldn't start with one as soul crushing as this.

"Maybe some variation of forever exists. I know that if I die—"

"Don't."

Andrew's voice is quiet but fierce. Almost a whisper.

But Neil needs to say it.

"I know that if I die I'm not just going to be forgotten," Neil said, "In the nest I was going to die, and my name was just going to fade. No one would have known me. Not like the foxes know me."

Neil grabs Andrew's hand and places it over his heart, the action snaps Andrew's gaze to him.

"Not like you know me," Neil said while holding Andrew's gaze.

Andrew's hand balls into a fist on Neil's chest, clutching the fabric tightly in his hand.

"I know that none of you will let me be forgotten," Neil's voice shakes. "I know you guys will come back fighting because that's what you do."

Neil blinks a few times, not wanting to cry. He didn't want to have his emotions, his fear, sadness, and sentimentality overwhelm him.

"You won't let all I've done, how far I've come, and how much I gave to get here fade away. So in a way I won't either. And that's not wishful thinking. That's me believing and trusting all of you." Neil said.

Andrew's hand tightened in Neil's shirt.

"I hate you," Andrew said. "And we aren't getting five fucking cats."

Neil grinned. The conversation wasn't over, not by a long shot. But hopefully they didn't need to ever finish it.

"Three."

"Two."

"Deal."

Andrew tugged Neil into another kiss. It was short and brief, but Andrew didn't let go when it was over. The two of them slid down and sat against the guard rail.

Neil allowed Andrew to hold him. Allowed Andrew to have the reassurance that he would never admit to needing.

Time was still ticking away in the background. Lost seconds turned into lost minutes.

But despite all of that, time never felt lost when Neil was in Andrew's arms.

Thursday came and the foxes seemed to see Neil's breakdown coming, because they left Neil with Andrew. The foxes took Jean and Kevin on a separate adventure, while Neil chain smoked his fears away in the window.

Neil's hands shook and his heartbeat was rapid in his chest. He avoided the TV, not wanting to risk seeing what Riko had to say about the upcoming game, and Neil wasn't prepared to hear how everyone was predicting a loss for the foxes.

The calm outside wasn't reflective of Neil's mental state at all, and he wasn't sure how to feel about it.

Neil sat down at the desk to work on homework. He stood up when that did nothing to alleviate his stress. He shrugged off Andrew when the blonde stuck out a hand to stop his pacing. He changed his mind and collapsed into Andrew only moments later.

He was bored, then he couldn't get his mind to shut up. He felt happy, then he was remembering what may be his demise. He was scared, then he was bravely thinking about what was to come.

The switching back and forth annoyed Neil so much that the next time he passed the mirror he yelled at himself.

"You need to decide if we are having a mental breakdown or not, you indecisive shithead!" Neil exclaimed while pointing strongly at himself in the mirror.

"Do we need to call Bee?" Andrew asked.

"No him and I will hash this out right now," Neil responded.

Andrew gave Neil a long hard stare.

"Don't punch the mirror."

"But it looks so punchable," Neil groaned.

"Neil you are staring at your own face," Andrew fired back.

"Are you telling me my face isn't punchable?"

Andrew was silent.

"Touche," Andrew finally said, "Still don't punch the mirror. You've already broken five of the dorm's mirrors this year."

Neil glanced at Andrew at that, "Seriously? Only five? Damn, normally I make it to ten."

"Do. Not. Punch. The. Mirror."

Neil pouted, then immediately wiped the expression away because Neil Abram Minyard did not pout.

"Just one punch," Neil said.

"No."

Neil huffed and left the mirror intact on the wall, before heading over to Andrew and flopping into his lap.

Andrew let out a grunt, but still readjusted Neil's lanky limbs so that they were curled up together.

Eventually Andrew soothed Neil's mind into blankness by scratching Neil's head lazily.

The calm was interrupted by a knock on the bedroom door. It was a rough hard pounding knock that interrupted all semblance of peace in the room.

Andrew made to get up, but Neil wrapped himself around Andrew further.

"Let whoever it is suffer. I'm comfortable." Neil groaned.

Andrew huffed, before standing up anyways but still holding Neil.

Andrew unlocked the door and said, "Come in", before depositing Neil into a beanbag and flopping into the other one.

Whoever was at the door, took a solid few minutes to struggle with the doorknob.

So Neil was pretty much certain it wasn't an assassin.

The rattling door knob finally stopped. And Neil briefly wondered if maybe it was a ghost.

It was a very stupid ghost if so.

"Just let me get it, Jean," Kevin's voice came out irritated and amused at the same time.

"Fuck you, you history bitch," Jean slurred right back. "I can open a door."

Neil raised an eyebrow.

So not a ghost.

The doorknob began rattling again, and Neil heard someone begin to kick the door.

"Jean let me—"

"I WILL NOT BE DEFEATED BY A DOOR KEVIN!"

Finally the door swung open, and Jean stumbled into the room. Completely shitfaced. A bandage adorning his cheek.

Neil was off his seat in seconds, "What the fuck happened? Jean never gets drunk. Why do you have bandages on your faces? What the fuck—"

Kevin throws a hand over Neil's mouth.

"Nothing happened," Kevin said, "The foxes took us to get some work done. And Jean and I wanted you to see it."

"That doesn't explain why Jean is shitfaced," Neil responded, watching as Jean almost faceplated into the ground. Andrew stopped the disaster from happening.

"It was the only way he was brave enough for the needle," Kevin deadpanned.

"Needle?" Neil asked more to himself than to anyone else. Then Neil's eyes grew wide as he realized, "Your tattoos!"

Kevin grinned and reached up, tearing off the bandage. Jean struggled for a moment with his, until finally Andrew just did it for him.

"Thanks dad," Jean murmured, slouching in Andrew's grasp.

Andrew dropped Jean and stepped over him to Kevin.

Kevin and Jean's faces were now adorned with a beautiful "A" instead of numbers. Neil raised an eyebrow.

"Does it stand for your test grades?" Neil asked, "If so I'm disappointed there is no plus there."

"Asshole," Kevin mumbled.

Neil frowned, "It stands for asshole?"

"No, I was—" Kevin cut himself off with a long sigh.

"It stands for Abram," Jean slurred drunkenly.

Neil was floored. His mind buzzed to a stop. The worries about the Ravens match halted almost completely.

"It stands for the brother who raised us, protected us, and made us better people." Kevin said, "And no matter what happens tomorrow, that's the story we are sticking to. And who we are now is who we are staying as."

"Riko won't win," Jean slurs, "No matter what happens tomorrow... Riko will never win again."

Jean was half drunk out of his mind when Neil hugs the two of them, so the hug ends up in an awkward tumble onto the floor. A tangle of limbs and laughter.

Three brothers who had gone through hell together, and who had come out better because of their own strength.

"I'm proud of you guys," Neil murmured.

"And we are so fucking proud of you Abram," Kevin responded.

The Foxes were excited to hear about Neil's reaction to the tattoos the next day. Apparently Allison had turned it into an entire team event. Neil didn't understand why it had to be an entire team event, but he didn't bother to question it.

Wymack loaded them all on the bus after the last of morning classes, but before Neil climbed aboard the bus Wymack caught him.

Orange and white fabric was pressed into Neil's hands. His normal number ten was emblazoned where it was supposed to be. But his new name replaced Wesninski.

Neil's hands clutched the jersey, and a happy smile made its way on his face. He knew he should be feeling fear. He should be shaking apart. But somehow the name on the back of his

jersey centered him.

The foxes had already made their way onto the bus, and Neil could feel their eyes watching.

"Are you ready kid?" Wymack asked.

There was so much emotion in Wymack's eyes. Fear, sorrow, determination. Neil couldn't even pick apart all of the feelings in the older man's eyes.

"Yeah," Neil said softly, despite not feeling ready at all. He was clutching the new jersey, his new life, tightly in his hands. "I'm ready."

Neil was ready for whatever was to come his way.

Despite the excitement that the foxes woke up with due to Kevin and Jean's new tattoos, the closer they got to West Virginia the quieter the bus became.

Even Nicky's excited babbling filtered off into a nervous silence. And none of the foxes commented on the way Andrew so openly held Neil's pulse.

Neil could see their glances and soft smiles at the sight, but none of them commented.

Neil was grateful for that.

Andrew clutched his bag tightly with his other hand, and Neil knew Andrew was thinking about the pills that rattled whenever the bag was jostled. Neil could see the clench to Andrew's jaw whenever he heard it. Neil could feel the fingers tighten to almost a bruising grip on his wrist.

Neil already had a plan to make sure Andrew was okay if he died. He had everything planned out in his head, even if he wouldn't dare say any of those things out loud.

But for now he leaned further into Andrew's touch. And he stole kisses as they drove closer to the moment of reckoning.

Castle Evermore was a mass of people by the time they got there. There was still an hour till serve, but that didn't matter for a game as big as this one.

Three members of Riko's perfect Court had made it to championships with the worst team in the league, and now they were going head to head again with their old brother.

The media was convinced it was going to be a bloodbath. They all said the Ravens would wipe the floor with the Foxes. Some smaller radio stations were rooting for the foxes. All of them saying they wanted the "underdogs" to win, but even they agreed the foxes chances were slim.

The Ravens had scored thirteen points on them the last time, and the Ravens had beaten the Trojans at full power. The foxes had struggled against the Trojans at half power.

Even with an extra two weeks of training, the foxes were already being written off as losers.

But Neil believed that the fact the Foxes had even made it this far, made them winners.

Cameras flashed as the Foxes climbed off the bus, and it didn't take long for the crowd to take note of Kevin and Jean's new tattoos. All that paired with the fact that Neil's was now burnt off, it sent the crowd into a frenzy. There were boos across the board. But a few began cheering.

Neil wanted to laugh in the face of a young female who burst into tears at the sight of the perfect Court being over.

The perfect Court had never existed in the first place, and Neil held no sympathy for the crying female who didn't understand jack shit about his life.

Questions were shouted from all over the place, but security guards pushed the crowd back and led the foxes through the mass of college Exy fans.

Neil didn't realize how much it felt like Binghamton until Andrew grabbed tightly to Neil's shirt, refusing to let go even as they finally made it inside the building.

The security guards looked exhausted by the time they reached the doors, and Neil wondered how much they were getting paid for this shit.

One of the guards stepped forward and began to talk. He went over the normal pregame run down. He told the foxes that they had the full court for the next thirty minutes. He told the foxes about each of the towers and what groups each of them was hosting.

The guard left the East tower out of the explanation, but Neil didn't need to hear who was there. Neil had no doubts that Ichirou Moriyama was watching the game.

The foxes geared up, quickly and quietly. A few of them glanced at Neil, as if to see if Neil was having a nervous breakdown.

Neil was past the point of having a nervous breakdown though. He was internally panicking so bad that it looped right back around to a calm and easy facade.

Neil's hands were what gave him away. His fingers trembled so badly that he was surprised they didn't fall right off. Neil managed to work on his gear and his jersey, before throwing on his warmup jacket so he could hide the name on the back.

When it came time to make their way to the court, all of the foxes did their best to put on the bravest faces that they could.

Nicky was the first one to break face.

He'd been jittery the entire walk up, but when faced with the Ravens court his face fell.

"Oh God," Nicky said fearfully. "I don't think— ERIC!!!"

Nicky's nervous tirade was cut off by his own sudden shout of excitement. Nicky took off like an Olympic runner and over to the guest seating for the foxes. His arms wrapped around the shoulders of whom Neil assumed to be Eric.

Seth was quick to follow. He had his younger brother in the stand, waving excitedly at the Foxes' only Senior. Matt and Renee quickly went over to where their parents were.

Dan followed with a smirk at Matt and Renee when it was revealed that Randy and Stephanie were holding hands. Allison caught up with them and handed money over to Dan.

Aaron took Katelyn over to meet Eric, and Jean practically sprinted over to the stands when he saw Jeremy Knox sitting there as well. And Kevin brightened when he caught sight of Thea leaning over the wall.

Andrew and Neil stayed put. Neither of them had family over there.

"You two could at least say hello," Wymack gruffed.

In response, Neil waved at the guests.

He was such a polite young man.

Wymack huffed out a breath, and muttered, "Why do I even try?"

Neil shrugged, and earned a pinch to his ear for his smartass replies.

A waving hand caught Neil's attention, and Neil grinned when he saw Betsy in the guest's section.

His nerves were still alight inside him like a forest fire, but he was happy to see Betsy.

"How are you Neil?" Betsy asked. Her smile was soft, and it gave way to the subtle nerves she was trying to keep behind it.

Neil thought about lying to save face, but he hadn't done that with Betsy in a long time.

"I'm scared," Neil said honestly.

Betsy sent him a smile, it was aged and saddened. It had been the look Abby and Wymack had given Neil all day, and it made Neil's heart ache.

"I think anyone would be afraid to be in your position," Betsy said.

Neil nodded, and from there Betsy took over the conversation.

Neil phased out of it, allowing the hand on the back of his neck to keep him safe as he traversed his thoughts.

Neil was afraid. He was shaking with fear over the road ahead. But there was also a calm finality to it all. Because no matter what happened tonight... it was the end. Neil had spent weeks preparing for the worst. Neil had spent months planning for the best.

There was nothing he could do to stretch this any longer. Nothing he could do to make this moment come slower. All he could do was fight to keep it, or die trying.

Neil knew Andrew could feel the moment that resolution settled in Neil's mind. Because the hand slowly dropped from his neck, and instead it turned Neil's head towards him.

"Are you ready?" Andrew asked.

Neil let out a shaky breath and brought a hand up to Andrew's face, "I'm either living or dying tonight... but either way... I'll be doing it free."

Betsy silently watched the exchange.

"We will be with you," Betsy said, " Whichever end you get tonight."

Neil wanted to say something else, but his eyes caught a familiar face making its way down the stands to where Neil was positioned.

Two familiar faces.

Neil sucked in a breath and gripped Andrew's hand tightly. Andrew in turn looked up to see what had caught Neil's eye.

Mary and Stuart Hatford strode towards Neil. Stuart did so with confidence, though Mary seemed hesitant in her approach.

Good. Neil hoped she fell.

"I'm sure you knew this," Stuart said instead of a normal greeting, "But you are being watched tonight."

Neil's teeth gritted at that. His eyes flicked to Mary and then back to Stuart. Andrew stood tense beside Neil, fingering his armbands.

"I figured," Neil said shortly.

Stuart winced.

"Kid—"

"I'm not your kid. And I'm certainly not hers, don't call me that." Neil spat the words like venom.

Stuart looked saddened, but he nodded. "I'm cheering for you tonight Neil. I was hoping you'd come visit England some time in the future if you survive."

Neil flicked a cold gaze to Mary. "Not while she's there."

"I can arrange for you to never see her again." Stuart said.

"Stuart—"

Mary began to protest but Stuart sent her a glare and she shut up.

"If anyone can win tonight," Stuart said, "It'd be you Nathaniel. Win so that I can show you some of England."

Neil blinked a few times, unsure of what part of that he should unpack first.

Lucky for Neil, he didn't have to unpack it. Riko, for the first time ever in his life, was actually convenient in his entrance. Drums kicked up, and the Edgar Allan fight music played as Riko Moryama set his foot upon the court. Neil let a cold smile grace his features, and he reveled in how his mother flinched away from it.

Neil slipped the jacket off of his shoulders, and he heard the moment the entire crowd saw.

"I'm not Nathaniel Abram Wesninski anymore." Neil said, dropping the jacket much like how one would drop a mic. Neil swiveled around, his eyes falling on Riko who'd paused mid step in his entrance. "I'm Neil Abram Minyard."

Neil heard the foxes all falling over themselves to speak and find out when the name change had happened. But Neil's eyes were on Riko.

Riko's eyes were cold and darkened with anger.

Neil's name had been another collar Riko had kept around Neil's neck. Riko had owned a Wesninski. Had owned Nathaniel.

Riko didn't own Neil. He never would. And the *Minyard* written across Neil's back was only a testament to that.

The other noises faded to the background as Neil felt the shackles that had held him to Edgar Allan finally break.

Neil warmed up with the foxes. Slowly his nerves fell away and determination took its place.

Most of the warmups were a blur. Neil could feel Riko's eyes on him. He could feel the entire stadium's eyes on him as he warmed up his body for the trial ahead. He could feel the eyes of every single fox as he led them, alongside Dan, back to the locker room.

The foxes all looked like they were about to puke. Their gazes kept finding Neil, and then looking away.

Wymack opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Abby glanced at him and put a hand on his shoulder.

No one knew what to say.

What could you say when such was riding on this game?

"No matter what happens... you'll all still be my family," Neil said.

Everyone's gaze snapped to him.

"You all have made this the best year of my life. No matter what happens out there—" Neil had to force the sudden emotions in his chest down, "No matter what happens I want you to know I'm proud of you. And know that I wouldn't change a damn thing. Let's play our best game. And let's fucking make Riko regret the day he fucked with us."

It didn't perk the foxes up completely. But it erased some of the tension in their shoulders, and it set some sort of determination in their eyes. Still it stays silent, no one having a response.

"Let's win this thing so I can get drunk," Allison says finally.

That startles a laugh out of Dan.

"Yeah!" Dan says, "I really want to drink after this. No way I am staying sober."

"I may be joining you," Wymack said, running his hands through his hair, "I need it after this."

The rest of the foxes finally break into excited chatter, all of them talking about what they'll do when they win the game. Eventually Wymack herds them all out of the room.

Andrew walks next to Neil. His expression was stony but Neil could see the tension in every inch of his shoulders.

"Yes or no?" Neil asked when the foxes turned the corner to enter the court.

Andrew glanced at Neil and wrapped a hand around Neil's wrist. Fingers pressed against Neil's pulse.

"Yes."

Neil kissed Andrew, and knew he was going to fight with everything he had.

He only hoped that it would be enough.

Renee was first out. Neil could see the tension in her frame as she took her place.

And Neil took his spot next to Kevin.

There was a drumbeat in the background. And Neil felt it in his teeth. The Edgar Allen fans had always called it the "winners beat". And before the major games, and during shots on goal during said games they played it, a slow beat that grew into a quick anxiety inducing tempo.

The beat was slow and Neil could feel his senses sharpening as he gazed at his teammates on the sidelines.

Seth of course was cheering like a dumbass. Nicky stood next to him, a brave smile on his face. But his eyes were nervous.

Aaron was gazing right back at Neil, he nodded when he noticed Neil was looking.

Allison was gripping the edge of the bench so hard her knuckles turned bright white.

Wymack and Abby were both standing, arms crossed and posture stiff.

The drumbeat began to get louder and faster and Neil's eyes flicked to the stands.

The crowd that knew nothing and were just thinking this to be a normal game of Exy.

Betsy, who despite her fear was smiling encouragingly.

Katelyn, who was cheering as loud as she could. She was trying to get the fox fans to be louder than that damn beat.

But it grew in pace and in volume, and the Edgar Allan fans were growing in volume as well.

Neil's eyes found his teammates on the court, as the refs checked in with the goalies.

Dan, Matt, Renee, Kevin, and Jean were all staring at the Ravens with intense focus.

The beat reached its fastest pace as the world seemed to stop around Neil completely. Neil glanced toward Andrew who was standing away from the foxes on the sidelines. Neil could see the ref's arm raise out of the corner of his eye.

Andrew gave Neil a nod, and Neil looked directly at Riko right as the buzzer went off and the game began.

A breath. The drum was muffled by the sound of the fox fans cheering as loud as they could, muffled by the sound of Neil's own heart.

The game started off violent. The Ravens gained possession right off the bat in a fabulous display of speed and agility. Riko, always having to be the one in the spotlight, rocketed down the court and accepted a pass from Reacher, before scoring immediately.

Neil felt his heart pounding in his chest as the odds of his survival lowered, but seconds later Renee served the ball back up court to Kevin. Kevin tossed the racket over to his left hand before shooting the ball forcefully into the goal.

The crowd was torn in half as half of them fell silent, and the other half screamed in both excitement and surprise.

Riko stared at Kevin with a rage that Neil had never even seen before. And that was shocking since Neil had spent most of his life unlocking new levels of Riko's rage.

Neil expected Kevin to shrink away from the glare Riko was sending Kevin's way, but Kevin simply glanced directly at Riko, unmoved and unshaken. Riko's fists clenched, and Kevin

tapped his racket against his own cheek. Against the ‘A’.

The crowd was wild in the background, and the foxes were being louder than Neil had ever heard them be before.

Riko’s rage turned to Neil, and Neil smirked.

“Time to play the game of our lives,” Neil called out, “Bro.”

Neil knew he was heard when Riko’s face twisted into a snarl, before the bitch turned and walked back to his starting point.

A gesture from Riko got the Ravens scrambling to move as well

The game remained brutal the entire time. A pace that neither the foxes nor Ravens had ever accomplished before. By half time, legs were shaking and gasps of utter discomfort were exiting everyone's lips. And they were no closer to knowing the end.

By the end of halftime, the Foxes and Ravens were still tied 14-14. And Neil's life was still on the line.

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Neil tapped his foot anxiously while sitting in the locker room. The annoying tapping sound was probably grating everyone's nerves but no one said anything to him. Instead they sat, shoulders tense and listening to Wymack's halftime speech.

Neil is sure Abby was trying not to let her nerves be seen, but the way she was flitting around and micro-managing small injuries was a dead giveaway.

The only person not outwardly showing their nerves was Andrew, and even he was fiddling with his own fingers, slowly chipping away at the nail polish that Neil had painted them with a few days ago.

It was all so suffocating and, unable to take another second of it, Neil sprung up and left the room.

"Neil—" Kevin blurted out as soon as Neil started walking, he sounded concerned.

"Betsy," Neil said simply.

Kevin and the rest of the foxes seemed to take that for what it was and they left Neil to walk out of the room unbothered.

Neil knew that the walk to where Betsy was wasn't far, and with how heavily patrolled the building was the foxes were unlikely to stop him from his trek.

Besides it wasn't like it was a lie, Neil felt the overwhelming urge to speak with Betsy.

Just like Neil had thought, the walk wasn't long and it remained uninterrupted.

Betsy didn't look surprised to see Neil, in fact without even glancing in his direction she moved subtly to the side so he could sit beside her. The rest of the seats were empty, the other friends and family of the foxes likely off getting refreshments during the break.

Neil and Betsy sat in silence for only but a moment before Neil spoke.

"It doesn't look like we can win this," Neil said quietly. "Matt has been limping for the last 15 minutes since Riko checked him against the wall. Nicky is exhausted. Aaron's ribs might be cracked. Dan is losing hope. Allison hasn't even mentioned a post game after party. Kevin and Jean are close to a breakdown. Seth keeps looking like it'll be his fault if I die tonight. Andrew looks like he'll go to jail for murder if Riko gets close to him. And Renee is trying to hold everyone together."

Betsy is silent. Then she speaks, "And what about you?"

Neil huffs out a breath, "I'm thinking about how much it's going to suck to lose this."

Betsy is quiet for a moment. Her typical smile isn't on her face.

Neil scans the crowd of people in the stands around them. All of them engaged in a cheering battle lead by the two different cheer teams on the ground.

"Neil," Betsy says. And Neil looks back at her. "On your first day here in Palmetto, you told Wymack you were prepared to kill yourself that very day. Kevin was still struggling with his alcoholism. Nicky was isolated and depressed. Seth was combative and unreachable. Allison was stubborn and unwilling to work with some of her teammates. Matt and Dan were blind to certain people's struggles on their team. Jean was quiet and hopeless. Renee was overwhelmed with the responsibility of keeping everyone somewhat together. Aaron wouldn't speak for himself. And Andrew refused to allow himself to feel. Can you say that's true today?"

Neil sucked in a breath, "No."

Betsy nodded and a small smile made its way onto her face. "Why do you think that is?"

Neil shook his head, "I don't know."

Betsy observed the court nodding. "You all had everything you needed except for one small thing. A catalyst. Something to get you all started and moving towards where you needed to be. For them the catalyst was you. And for you—"

"It was them," Neil replied quietly. "And I'm not ready to let them go."

"Then don't," Betsy says, "Hold on to them and they'll hold onto you."

"It doesn't look like I can."

"Change your perspective," Betsy says.

"But I—"

Betsy cuts Neil off and turns to face Neil fully in her seat. "Neil you've been changing your perspective since day one. You changed your perspective on team and family, on life and death, on love and sex, on therapists and doctors, on coaches, and most importantly your perspective on how you view yourself. Don't go back on how you looked at life before because of this one game."

"The perspective is the same no matter how I turn though," Neil responds. "It's like the fucking puzzle cube. It's all solved on one side but not the others. Life is great but this game can end in failure no matter how solved everything looks."

Betsy smiles wide. "Then change where you stand. Mix the puzzle cube back up. Mess up that side again. Go back to the start."

Neil's breath stutters in his chest.

Change where you are standing.

Mix it up.

Go back to start.

"That's it." Neil said. "I'm going to live."

Neil looks at Betsy and grins wide, "I'm going to mix this cube the fuck up and chuck it at Riko's face so they both fall out the fucking window."

Betsy's face turned concerned and then she stuttered, "Um Neil... That's uh—"

Neil doesn't listen, "Thanks Betsy!" He shouts springing out of his seat and settling into a dead sprint back to the locker rooms.

The foxes were in a dead silence when Neil burst into the room, so they all jumped out of their skins when the door slammed against the wall and Neil entered. Eyes wide and crazy... and grinning.

"Um Neil?" Matt asked. "You good? Cause uh—"

"It's a cube," Neil said excitedly.

There was a silence and the foxes all stared at Neil as if the answer wasn't so simple.

"Huh?" Aaron finally cut in and seemed to voice the collective opinion in a single syllable.

Neil opened his arms wide and stared at the rest of the foxes, waiting for someone to get it.

"The puzzle cube!" Neil said excitedly. "You spin it and flip it and rotate it, and you think you have it solved because one side is all the same color and the side is good it looks like its supposed to, but it's not perfect."

Allison was the only one even pretending to understand, "Uh-huh!" She said with a terrified grin.

So Neil continued, "But while that one side might be perfect it isn't complete, it won't count as solved, so you have to mess up that side and start from the beginning."

Even Andrew's strong unbreakable facade was broken into one of utter disbelief, and Seth leaned over to whisper to Andrew.

"Dude your boyfriend has spilled his fucking marbles down the drain."

Renee finally cut in with a sweet smile, "Neil I am so happy for you that you have found this answer in life, but you could die tonight if we don't focus."

"No!" Neil threw his hands in the air and yelled in frustration, "You're not understanding."

"Dude," Seth says with an honest look in his eyes, "I love you to death, but your life is on the line. And your ranting about a colored puzzle cube."

"Yeah," Nicky said, "I mean I know you hate the thing, but Neil I thought we got your priorities figured out."

Neil could barely breathe, he was excited and full of adrenaline. His thoughts were a wind turbine in overdrive. He wanted to think about what he could have if he survived. He desired to dream about Andrew and his future. He needed to fucking focus on this plan, which he could admit internally to himself in private, that he wasn't explaining in a good way at all.

Andrew's hands were suddenly cupping Neil's face.

"Explain Junkie," Andrew said.

The others silently watched, and Neil breathed.

"The cube," Neil said, "The team is... the cube. We look great in the way our positions are now. But against the Ravens it's not how we are meant to be."

"Neil," Wymack says, sounding somewhat relieved that his striker hadn't completely lost his mind. "I understand, but I can't just flip everyone into new places. We wouldn't win like that."

"No," Neil agrees meeting Andrew's eyes. Andrew finally took his hands away from Neil's face. "We just need to change one person's position."

The foxes all looked at each other confused and Neil took a deep breath.

"I started this game just as early an age as Riko, Kevin, and Jean. I was perfect court too. But I wasn't a striker."

Kevin's eyes shot up, and he proceeded to smack himself on the head. "God I'm so stupid!" Kevin said.

"You're going to play backliner," Matt breathed, "You and Jean played year on the backline together You'll be a fucking wall."

"It's time to go back to start," Neil grinned, "Because the only reason Riko can say he's such a good striker, is because he had to play me."

The other foxes are grinning and laughing and already talking to each other about the plan.

Wymack clears his throat, and Neil's smile fades.

The other foxes go silent.

Wymack looks around the room, and then looks at Neil. And Neil doesn't think he imagined the misty look in Wymack's eyes.

"Play like you've got everything to lose captain," Wymack said.

Neil's face splits into a ginormous grin and he breathes out, "I'm going to live."

Neil turns to Andrew who cocks an eyebrow up.

"I'm going to live because I have so much to live for." Neil says.

Andrew rolls his eyes, but there is a slight flush to his cheeks. Neil smiles wide as Andrew takes a drink of his water to hide the redness.

A sudden thought crosses Neil's mind, and he loses all brain to mouth filter.

"When I survive this," Neil says, "Whenever you're ready, I want you to fuck me."

Andrew chokes.

And behind Neil a water bottle is dropped, someone spits out their drink, and someone else gasps.

Neil looks behind him to see that the foxes had heard every word he'd just said to Andrew.

"Oh come on," Neil says, "You bet on literally everything else but you didn't bet on me being a fucking bottom."

Wymack, to his credit, only put his hand in his head and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Yeah," Seth says, nodding sagely, and being the only one in the room who seemed to understand what had just happened. "See calming someone with sexual frustration is fucking perfect."

No one else got to comment because the warning buzzer went off.

"Okay," Neil said clapping his hands. "Me and Jean are going to lock down backline. Aaron and Nicky be ready to sub in as needed, there is a high likelihood that Jean gets knocked around hard as fuck now."

"What about you?" Dan asks cutting in, "Won't they be knocking you around to."

"Yes but I am not leaving the court until either me or Riko is dead." Neil responds.

"Comforting," Aaron throws in, its sarcastic but his mouth his quirked into a smile.

"Anyways," Neil says before continuing, "Allison and Dan, I am going to let you figure out as we go who's where for dealers. And finally Kevin and Seth, knock them dead up front. Show them everything you've learned this year."

The team cheers.

And Neil feels Nicky slap him on the back, right before the doors opened and the court was offered to Neil on a platter.

The next half started, and it was only after the buzzer went off that Riko saw Neil in his new position. The clench to Riko's jaw made Neil grin and look back at Andrew.

"Sorry," Neil said looking back at Andrew, "I know you wanted to break him first, but I'm about to be checking him so hard he slides all the way home."

Andrew gave a, 'What can you do gesture,' and Neil looked back to Riko, who had heard him, just in time to run and slam into him as Riko got the ball. The wall rattled with the force Neil knocked into Riko and the crowd was silent and Riko had to take a minute to recollect himself.

Neil picked the ball up and sent it up to his strikers.

If Neil was back at the nest, he'd be getting beat for this.

Seeing as Neil was with the foxes though, he was probably going to get a blowjob or cuddles.

Not a bad trade at all.

Finally Riko got back up and he shot a glare up the court where Kevin and Seth were battling the Raven backliners.

"You're fucked when you get back to me Nate," Riko growls.

Neil laughs, just as Kevin takes a shot on goal, it gets deflected but they still had an entire half to get one. "I think you misunderstand Riko. I'm never going back."

Riko snarls. And a game that was already bloody and violent, somehow amped up even more so.

Neil and Riko especially had to be warned by several refs to cool the animosity. But Neil and Riko continued to get worse every time.

The game continued on right up until the final minute.

A raven shot on Andrew and Andrew swatted it back down, only for Riko to run to it.

Andrew was still gathering his balance from the first save, and Riko would have had an easy shot on goal... if Neil wasn't there.

And Neil will always have the foxes' back.

Neil slammed into Riko, sending himself and the Riko sliding in one direction while the ball was left behind dead center to the goal. The Jean is there, sending it back up.

Neil groaned and held his stomach as his ribs protested against every movement he made. His legs were shaking with how much Neil had overused them. The buzzer went off and Neil breathed, because he somehow had to make it through overtime.

Except when Neil looked up, the scoreboard said the foxes won.

Kevin held his raquet high in the air while Seth hung off him like a monkey. The rest of the team minus Andrew was crowded around them.

Neil didn't have any feeling in his legs, or he would have joined them. Instead Neil glances over to Riko, and through the pants of a dying man, and a smile of someone who'd won the war, "I am. Never. Going. Back. You stupid fuck."

Riko's face twisted and he raised his raquet to bring it down on Neil's head. Neil just closed his eyes.

He wasn't suicidal. But just as he would always have the foxes back...

Neil heard the whoosh of a goalkeeper's raquet and then he heard Riko's scream.

...They would always have his.

The paramedics came to get Riko rather quickly. Which was a shame, because Neil was rather enjoying the symphony of Riko's screams.

Neil of course did not voice this outloud, as it would not have been taken well by the slew of startled and silent Exy fans in the stand.

Neil had to be helped off the court as well, unable to stand on his utterly dead legs. Also hardly able to breathe with what was definitely broken ribs from the final check he had pulled.

Despite that though, he waved off the medics' attempts to help him and accepted Katelyn and Andrew's offered shoulders. Slowly and carefully he made his way off the court and to the showers, which the foxes left thankfully empty for Neil and Andrew.

Andrew took over from there, scrubbing the sweat from Neil's skin and hair, before wrapping Neil in a towel and doing the same for himself.

Neil didn't even try to pretend like he wasn't watching. And Andrew didn't attempt to stop him.

After they toweled off and got dressed, they switched places with the rest of the foxes and answered the questions the police and security had for them.

It was a long time before Wymack was finally allowed to go retrieve the bus. All of the spectators had left. And the friends and family of the foxes had all headed back to Palmetto to set up a party for when the foxes arrived. The foxes of course, even though it would almost be one in the morning by the time they got back, would no doubt participate. All of them, riding the high of a championship trophy.

Neil wasn't surprised about a man dressed in a black suit coming to the locker room door after Wymack had left.

"Nathaniel Wesninski," The man said. "We have a few more questions for you."

Andrew shot Neil a look and grabbed Neil's elbow when Neil went to get up.

Neil shot a questioning look back at Andrew, but Andrew turned to face the man.

"His legs are shot and his ribs are broken," Andrew said, "He needs help walking."

The request was plain as day if you know who you were talking to. And Neil was sure the person who'd sent the man did.

The man's head tilted to the side, and his hand went up to his ear piece.

"You," The man pointed at Andrew, " Can come too."

The man faced the rest of the foxes who were deathly silent.

"All of you stay put," The man said.

The foxes sent Neil a scared questioning look, and Neil did his best to nod subtly in reassurance.

The walk to the East tower was long and treacherous, but to the guard's credit, he didn't try to hurry them along too much.

When they finally managed to reach the doors, Neil took a deep breath and nodded to the guard.

Ichirou Moriyama stood in the center of the room, head held high and hands folded calmly in front of him.

Behind him, were all of Neil and Andrew's nightmares who still had the fucking audacity to continue breathing.

Jackson and Romero were cuffed and kneeling on the ground.

Proust and Drake were in a similar fashion.

And Riko was dead center to them all, wrists uncuffed, and a bright red cast on his arm.

Behind Riko stood Tetsuji.

Behind them all stood a row of men who had all pledged their allegiance to the Moriyama empire. None of them were people who either Neil or Andrew could beat in a fight.

Even Renee would have wilted under a single one of their stares.

Neil felt Andrew go tense at the sight of Drake, but somehow both of them managed to remain calm.

"Congratulations," Ichirou said. Though his eyes were threatening. "You have proven to be more than my father's bed warmer."

Neil gripped Andrew's shoulder harder to keep the blonde from proceeding in a way that could be taken as disrespectful.

Andrew's jaw clenched but he remained silent.

Neil searched for words as he nodded, "Thank you, my Lord." Neil finally settled on.

Ichirou gave Neil an appraising look.

"Doctor Proust is about to have a horrible accident. Drake Spear is about to run away to Russia never to be heard from again. Romero and Jackson are going to disappear into hiding. And my brother and Uncle... I've decided to let you decide."

The men on the floor must have already known the fates handed down to them, because they reacted to the news with a hopeless air. Neil let out a shuddering breath.

"To the victor," Ichirou says, holding out the gloves and the gun, "Goes the spoils... At least I believe that's how that saying goes."

Neil needed time to think, so with a glance at Andrew, Neil handed the gun to him. Andrew seemed to understand and took it with a shake to his hands only Neil would notice. He carefully let go of Neil, who's legs felt shaky but strong with the adrenaline pumping through him.

Neil watched with glee as Drake shivered when Andrew pressed the barrel against his head. Drake said something inaudible to Neil's ears, and Andrew's teeth gritted hard. The shake to his hands was gone. And then one shot later, Drake was dead.

Neil watched Riko clench his jaw and begin to cry.

For Proust, Andrew beckons Neil over, and on shaky legs Neil goes. After all the two of them had promised each other to kill him together. Neil stands in front of Andrew, back to chest. His hand closes over top of Andrew's on the gun. Neil feels Andrew's puff of breath on the back of his neck.

Proust doesn't say a word, only cowers under the weight of the barrel. Andrew's soft arm wraps around Neil's waist and two of them fire the gun together.

Neil takes the gun for Romero and Jackson. And shoots them both between the eyes.

Ichirou looks at Neil in question when Neil pauses after that.

"I want Tetsuji to live with his failure." Neil says, proud of how his voice barely shakes at all.

Ichirou inclines his head to the man standing behind Tetsuji, and suddenly Tetsuji is being led away.

Neil stares Tetsuji down the entire way, but the man never lifts his eyes from the floor.

"And my brother?" Ichirou questions.

Neil's breath shakes, and he finally turns to Riko.

Anger surges through Neil at the way Riko was crying on the ground in front of him. A human incapable of feeling anything for anyone but himself.

Neil steps one foot forward and then another. Until finally he'd stopped in front of Riko. Neil crouched down.

"I used to love you," Neil says honestly, "I used to respect you. I would have done anything for you."

Riko lets out a shuddering breath in front of Neil.

Neil continues, "But you broke my heart. My trust. Our brotherhood... And now I want you to die knowing one last thing... You *never* broke me."

Neil looks to Ichirou, and the Lord gestures. Neil has gloves put on his hands and a new gun. One likely registered under Riko's name. One that would be found in Riko's own hand sometime later tonight.

Riko's eyes finally shoot up to Neil.

"Nate," Riko says, " We are brothers. Don't do this. We grew up together. I'm sorry for what I did. I am so sorry."

And maybe it was the truth. Maybe it was fiction. It was most probably the confession of a man who had nothing left to lose.

Neil would know, he'd been there.

Neil kneels and presses the gun to Riko's temple.

"Nate-" Riko whispers brokenly. "Don't."

Neil lets a sick grin cross his face. And then in a sickeningly sweet voice he speaks.

"Say please, Riko."

Riko's eyes widen and a single word bubbles past wet lips, "Fuck."

Riko's head drops in defeat.

"Wrong answer," Neil says. And Neil fires the gun.

Ichirou watches his brother's body hit the ground, with a lack of care that puts Andrew's apathetic gaze to shame.

Finally Ichirou looked up at Neil, "May this prove my loyalty to our deal."

"It does, My Lord," Neil responds.

Ichirou nods, "And may this be a reminder to honor your side as well."

Neil nods again, "It is, My Lord."

Ichirou snaps, and the gun is taken from Neil's hand and placed into Riko's.

"You are dismissed then," Ichirou says, "Let us never meet like this again."

"Yes, My Lord," Neil said.

Neil's legs were functioning on their own enough for Neil to move just slightly slower than 'oh shit' pace out of the room. And once Andrew and he had made it to the end of the hall, the door shut between them and their now dead worst nightmares, Neil turned to Andrew and immediately fell into the blonde's arms.

Neil could hear Andrew's racing heart, and he was sure Andrew could feel Neil's shuddering breaths on his neck.

They stood there for only a few more moments, before the panic turned into laughter and unhinged giggles.

Andrew pushed Neil away slightly and Neil began laughing through tears. Concern was prevalent in Andrew's eyes

"I get to live," Neil said.

Andrew's eyes softened and he pulled Neil's forehead against his own.

Right before Andrew leaned in completely to capture Neil's lips, Neil whispered one more time.

"I get to live."

The drive back to Palmetto was smooth, no one wanted to sully the good atmosphere with the thought of what if. And Andrew and Neil weren't ready to talk about what had happened in the tower.

No doubt they would have to the next day when Riko's Death hit the news, but Neil just wanted a night without any thoughts of the demons he left behind.

It was the first night of his new life, and Neil intended to make it the best he possibly could.

"Hey Seth," Neil called out.

Seth's head popped up over the seat.

"Can tonight be the start of the best year of my life?" Neil asked, "You know... one without the rape and brutalizations."

Nicky let out a startled laugh and Seth grinned.

"Hell Yeah brother!" Seth said enthusiastically. "We are gonna crank it and yank it!"

"Umm," Matt said concerned, "Seth that doesn't sound like that means what you think it means."

Neil giggled and laid on Andrew's shoulder as he watched Matt and Seth devolve into a good natured argument.

Despite the disagreement on what to call the party when they got back to the dorms, they all had a fantastic time.

Though Neil can't really recall what he did after drink number five, if Andrew's word and memory is to be believed... Neil and Dan had a stripper-dance off.

No one else remembered it, *thank god* .

Months passed, and the foxes settled back into the last stretch of their classes, alongside a lighter practice schedule to stay in shape.

Jean continued to see Jermey.

Kevin stayed true to not drinking. Thank god he and Renee had passed out before Neil had apparently started stripping after the Raven's game.

Aaron brought Katelyn around much more often and, to Neil's delight and the twins' horror, Katelyn turned out to be like Neil's very own twin.

As for Aaron's trial, it was funny. If someone were to mysteriously "run away" and not show up to their trial date, as Drake did, the judge would be far less likely to hear their side of the story.

Renee continued to spar with Neil and Andrew. And continued to kick both their asses.

Dan began showing Neil the ropes of becoming captain. It was a rope Neil often threatened to hang himself with. As a joke of course.

Matt regularly roped Neil into movie nights and card games. Which also led to Neil being far too familiar with the game called Uno.

Many murders almost happened because of Uno. And that's why Neil was banned from playing Uno.

Neil was also banned from playing Monopoly and Clue, but that was not his fault.

Nicky continued to build a friendship with Seth. The friendship the Wymack regularly wished had never occurred.

Seth accepted a Pro-Contract with the Philadelphia Eagles. And surprisingly enough Kevin had placed himself in charge of Seth's going-away party.

Allison of course had plans for graduating and joining Seth in Philadelphia. But until that time, Neil was her model and make-up tester.

Andrew and Neil, had a lot of false starts and healing to get through. Months of it. When what they had was no longer on a time crunch, they slowed down and took it easier.

The night that they finally accomplished it was the night of Seth's going away party. After shoving everyone else into their beds to sleep after a night full of alcohol, Andrew and Neil hopped in the car to Columbia.

It wasn't perfect but yet it was at the same time, and as Neil lay staring at Andrew, Neil smiled.

"I am glad my mom left me there," Neil said, "I wouldn't have this otherwise. I would be some kid still running away from the life he could have had."

Andrew huffed out a breath in the dark," Do you believe in fate?" He asked.

"No," Neil snorted.

"How about luck?" Andrew questioned.

Neil traced a finger over where he knew Andrew's jaw was.

"I believe in you," Neil said," And the foxes. My family. My home. My freedom."

Andrew makes it as if he was going to shove Neil off the bed, but he doesn't let go of Neil's waist so Neil just rolls right back into his original position while laughing.

"Why?" Neil questions.

Andrew is silent for a moment before speaking.

"Because I think no matter what "you" we talk about, whatever universe there is, I think you're always a fox running back towards home. A fox desiring freedom. You were always meant to be free."

Neil breathes out a shaky breath. "Yeah," he agrees.

Because wasn't that a thought.

Die free or die a failure.

Neil shut his eyes and allowed Andrew to card his fingers through Neil's hair.

Neil would die free.

Not today or anytime soon.

But one day he would die as free as he lived.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading this story and for bearing with me for these last few chapters.

Now for those of you who actually wanted the sad ending, it might still be coming. I just don't think I am going to put it in the actual chapters. I might put it as a part of the series alongside the Andrew POV of Die free or Die a failure.

To everyone that commented you are amazing.

To everyone who kudosd this, thank you so much.

To those who were here since day one. I want your persistence in life not gonna lie.

To those who created tiktok edits, thank you for reminding me how much I loved writing this story.

To those who drew art of this story, please show me, I really want to see what you imagined when reading what I wrote.

To those who have translated, you are the bomb and super fucking smart to be able to speak more than one language when I can barely speak/read/write one.

I am super fucking proud of this fic. I think it stands as my best one so far, and while I might not have accomplished the goal of having the fic with the most kudos or hits. I'm still proud that I managed to do what I did with it.

Thank all of you! And I will see you all the next time I'm writing.

Works inspired by this one

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